

THE MARK OF CAIN

Chapter 1

Daniel Diego prayed urgently for Naomi to stop screaming. The answer to his prayers came when Naomi's screams were silenced, as her blood gushed from her cut throat, splashing across the deck.

#

Daniel jerked awake, his bed wet with his sweat despite the smart fiber's best attempt to keep him cool and comfortable.

He wasn't aboard the *Anson*, hadn't been for years, but it was the one place he never left. Even when he didn't have nightmares, the *Anson* was his home. It ghosted him the way its crew haunted the steel decks.

Daniel swung himself upright and let his feet touch the floor, as he did the artificial intelligence watching him brought the room lights up until a dusk-like glow filled his bedroom.

"I don't care what the Guardian Angels say -- he needs help. If he was a threat to himself, they'd call for it. Anyway, Danny hasn't had a nightmare for something like three weeks, he's dealing."

"Yeah, but this one was worst than the last one; I think he's still in trouble."

"Oh you're always saying that crap..."

"Shut off the taps," Daniel ordered. The room plunged into silence. The voices were still there -- Daniel knew better than anyone that they were still watching, still commenting on every aspect of his life -- just now Daniel didn't hear them. He shouldn't have called up the tap in the first place. Let 'em watch, screw 'em.

As Daniel stumbled into the bathroom, the water taps already turning themselves to his preferred setting when he had a rough night, he was aware that anyone on the planet, and throughout the solar system really, could watch if they wanted to. He could, of course, watch anyone he wanted -- it was the foundation of the Accountability Society. There were no secrets from anyone, but it was the glare from the Great Eye that he needed to escape the most.

Jets of cold water bit into his skin as Daniel stepped into the shower.

"Time," he commanded.

The Programmable Electronic Matter, PEM, surface of the shower configured the trapped electrons of its surface into a printed circuit of a clock and displayed the current time at eye level for Daniel.

Christ, most of the night stretched out before him. There would be no more sleep, Daniel already knew this from five years of nightmares, but if all went well at the Committee Hearings in the morning there would be a chance, a prayer, for privacy and solitude.

#

“Deviants! I’m not afraid to use the word! That’s what these people are, and the League of Earth should not be granting a charter to a colony of deviants.” The Senator thundered his charges out into the hearing room.

The North American Hearing room was the largest in the Senate building, and despite the name, it was located in London, the seat of Government for the League of the Solar System. Margaret tried to ignore the worst of the hyperbole from Senator Kellenberg, while still listening to the man. The effort gave her a headache.

Margaret couldn’t decide if tradition or extravagance commanded the decor, but the room was paneled in real wood, rather than PEM imitating wood. The light fixtures were PEM panels affixed to the wood surfaces. Currently the lighting was set for an unpleasantly strong white light.

Blinking in the harsh light, Margaret could see that the Senators, seated behind a single enormous oaken desk, were treated to a somewhat more subdued lighting.

As a nod to the voyeur society around them, a strip of PEM had been added to the hearing room, providing everyone in the League with the ability to generate video and audio processors to watch the proceeding. Throughout the solar system people were getting their jollies watching the perverts defend their colonial charter.

Margaret didn’t care what most people thought, and the thoughts of the voyeuristic pack mattered less than any others.

Margaret concluded Senator Kellenberg represented Venus well: he’s exactly like that planet: acidic, intemperate, and full of hot air.

The Senator's oratory had been going on for nearly an hour. An hour of suggestions of malignancy, criminal intent, and immorality for the belief that life was better when it had a little privacy in it. It wasn’t as if they were going to force the Senator to live on Seclusion, but he fought them anyway, and now their charter was in danger.

While the decision was not up to the Senator alone, his influence was disproportionate on the committee. There had to be an unwritten law in politics that a person’s power had to be inversely proportional to their intelligence.

“For nearly two centuries the civilized peoples of this League have abandoned the degenerate concept of privacy.” The disdain the senator

dripped into his tone was one usually reserved for murderers and child-molesters.

“Senator,” Todd patiently interjected. “With due respect to your opinion...”

Todd Moss, the Colonial Administrator for the proposed colony of Seclusion, was in over his head, Margaret thought. Todd, with sandy blond hair somewhat in disarray, and blue eyes clearly fatigued, was not an image that would save the colony.

“This is not a matter of opinion, sir. It is a matter of moral fact.” The Senator drummed his fist down on the table, punctuating each word as he spoke. “Privacy is the enemy of accountability!”

“Morality isn’t the issue, Senator, the law is. We have won the lottery -- which the League established so it would not be just rich and powerful corporations settling space, but so that the universe could be open to all of us. We should be granted our charter.” Todd tried so hard to be reasonable. Margaret could have told him the futility of that course. Blind bigots and fools never listened to reason. Power and force were the only arguments they understood.

The Senator was about to launch into another mindless tirade when Daniel leaned forward. Margaret doubted there was a person in the League who didn’t recognize Daniel Diego. With deep brown skin and piercing dark eyes, he was extremely photogenic, even the long hair he had grown since leaving the Explorer seemed to add to his heroic image. Margaret knew that it was the heroic image that helped make Seclusion viable, even if it did make Seclusion feel a little less hers.

“Senator,” Daniel’s voice, rich and calm, resonated in the chambers. “It is not perversion to wish not to be spied upon. While it is not as the majority lives today, being in a minority is not the same as being a deviant.” Daniel tried to draw the Senator out of his rage.

Kellenberg did seem to calm a bit, but Margaret suspected this was more from fear of attacking a hero such as Daniel than any momentary glimpse of reason.

“Captain Diego,” Kellenberg’s voice was as smooth as oil, and twice as slippery. “While I have the highest respect for your years of service to The League, perhaps those years have made you a little too distant. I’ve always thought the explorers spent too many years away from civilized society.”

“That may be, but it is the founding principle of The League’s Colonization Program that diversity and differences are to be valued.” Daniel spoke with his voice pitched ever so slightly lower, playing for the audience that would be watching. “It is for those values that my

fellow Explorers have given their lives. I ask you not to disrespect them by terminating our tiny colony.”

Margaret would have smiled -- had the situation not been so grim. Daniel had learned a great deal in the unblinking gaze of the Great Eye.

“You are asking the people of our League to support, at no small expense, a colony which flaunts the very core values that they hold dear.” Margaret could hear the Senator building up to another venting of superheated hot air.

“In an environment where men may act in secret, villainy and suffering thrive. My constituents know I am an honest man, because there is no element of my life that they cannot observe, either live or recorded. My every meeting, my every word is out there, so the temptation that wrecked leaders of the past is removed from my colleagues and myself.

Women, children, and men of all ages are safe today, because there are no shadows in which they can be raped, robbed or killed.

Every citizen knows the trustworthiness of his fellows, because every citizen knows that they are subject to the light of open knowledge. And that, sir, is the light of truth.”

Too many members of the Colonization board were nodding as the Senator sat back down. Damn it, this was going to end badly.

Margaret shuffled her flimsies back and forth. Yeah, undoubtedly scores of people watching now were analyzing her every motion. Tough! The Senate could have provided a table with a decent PEM surface and connection to the A.I. network. Instead, they had to sit at this inert hunk of wood and sort through flimsies to find the facts and records they needed to rebut the idiocy they were hearing today. And when had fact and reason ever defeated idiocy?

The hearing lasted another ninety minutes, but Margaret simply let the words pass over and around her. The committee directed few questions at her, Seclusion’s head of engineering. The technical details of her job were as boring to the politicians as their lives were to her. In the end, the meeting adjourned, with hopes of a final decision coming in just a few days.

Margaret listened as the Senators gave their closing statements -- too many os(?) Senators were speaking of morality and the inherent goodness of transparency.

The crowd of spectators murmured in agreement. Margaret was aware of their eyes on the back of her head, their real eyes, it being an unwritten convention that all government matters occurred in real time without avatars or teleconferencing, so even spectators to government

functions felt obligated to arrive in person rather than their virtual selves.

Outside a cold London fog had settled into the evening to greet them as they left the League building.

Through the fog, the dim light from illuminated buildings could be seen. Great panels of PEM in some cases were animated in displays of advertisement and information, but altogether the city had a tasteful feel that was missing from America, Margaret decided. Quite a few of the buildings used their PEM coating to recreate the architecture of lost London, a theme-park of national pride and heritage.

And of course, they also used that PEM to watch and to listen. There wasn't a square centimeter in all of the United Kingdom, or any civilized location in the League that wasn't being scried upon.

As they descended the sweeping marble steps of the League building, Margaret, Todd, and Daniel, were swarmed by a cloud of public-eye gnats. Evidently, the fog was bothering the video processors of the PEM-coated buildings nearby and the voyeurs wanted to make sure they saw every move and heard every sound.

The cloud of voyeurs thickened around Daniel. If it were possible to have less than zero privacy, that was what the public left Daniel. Margaret growled as they waited for a public car to roll up.

The cold moist fog dampened the already quiet sounds of the electric ground cars as they sped by the League building. Most of the cars were neutral gray because their temporary occupants hadn't bothered to switch the PEM from its blank state, but a few cars were brightly colored affairs, flashing color and light to celebrate events known only to their occupants, and any voyeurs who had been observing.

A large gray ground car rolled to a stop before Todd, Daniel, and Margaret as they stepped to the curb. The door slid open, revealing a large passenger compartment with two rows of seats facing each other. Margaret took a seat opposite that of Daniel and Todd.

"Don't have kittens," Todd said as they piled into the large ground car. "Senator Kellenberg may not want to approve the colony, but it would be a very bad precedent for the approval committee to deny a charter that was awarded by the lottery."

"Never count on politicians to do the right thing," Margaret crossed her arms sternly as she sat.

"No one would ever accuse you of being an optimist," Daniel suggested as he climbed in.

“We’ve made our case. There’s nothing to do but wait. Still, I take hope that no charter awarded in the lottery has ever been denied.” Todd relaxed, letting his long legs stretch out in front of him.

“Take me home first,” Todd ordered the vehicle, “then the others.” He turned back to Daniel and Margaret. “Catherine’s undoubtedly on pins and needles after that meeting.”

The ground car started up as ordered and navigated its way through the heavy traffic towards Todd’s temporary apartment here in London.

Margaret watched the traffic outside her window. Ground cars were speeding this way and that. It was astounding that they had ever let people maneuver these things on their own. Margaret couldn’t imagine trusting her life to the skills of people who had never known proper training. Things were so dangerous and wasteful back then, but still, they had had privacy.

In a useless gesture, Margaret darkened the window, fully aware that the PEM surface of the interior of the passenger compartment was already filled with video and audio processors.

The passenger compartment was silent for several moments. Neither Todd nor Daniel really understood the politics of the situation, that was certain. It was understandable of Daniel. Years out on exploration missions hadn’t honed his skills. Damn it! He was too straightforward and honest. They really should keep him away from any hearings, but the hero brought too much capital to be excluded.

Todd that was a different matter. Administration and management were politics; he shouldn’t be underestimating the pressure to deny their charter.

Be it a precedent or not.

“I’m not going to take anything for granted until I have Seclusion’s red dirt under my feet,” Margaret said.

“It’s not red,” Daniel corrected. “The dirt is just dirt-colored. The foliage is red. No green chlorophyll.”

“It was an expression, Daniel.” Margaret crossed her arms and sat back. The man could be so pedantic about details, yet not see what was right in front of his face.

A holo-projector manifested itself in the PEM surface of the roof of the passenger compartment.

Frank Boone’s face appeared floating between the three of them; Margaret found herself staring at the back of the man’s head.

“Todd, the financial representatives of the colony want to meet with you right away.”

“Jesus, Frank, I just finished a six-hour hearing, can’t they wait until tomorrow at least?” The tension in Todd’s voice grated on Margaret’s nerves.

“It’s the hearing they are so fired up about.” Frank looked to someone out of the pickup. Margaret was momentarily tempted to fire up a connection to the Great Eye, and see whom Frank was speaking with, but she resisted. She hated how the snoop-obsessed society had even her thinking such things.

“No charter has ever been denied from a lottery win, can’t you explain that to them?”

Todd’s conversation had gone on while she had wrestled with temptation. She didn’t need to listen in; she knew how this would end. It was a wonder that Todd got any sleep at all.

“Fine,” Todd said. “Tell ‘em I’ll be there in three hours or so or so. I’ll have to catch a sub-orbital to New York.”

Frank smiled. He was off the hook and wouldn’t have to deal with anxious and scared people. Frank would have been a much unhappier man working for Margaret. People didn’t shirk their duties like that around her.

Margaret half listened as Todd called his wife and explained to Catherine that, again, he would be late getting home. If he got home tonight at all. Margaret knew what a debt the colony owed Todd. It was his masterful skills that had allowed them the organization to have this dream at all, but he was working himself into the ground. He wouldn’t be any good to them, Catherine, or himself if he didn’t slow down. Well, once they were on their way, provided Senator Kellenberg didn’t stop them, Todd would have time to rest.

“I actually cooked a real meal tonight, you know.” Catherine said via the holo-display. A mass of black hair surrounded her small round Filipina face. “Like an old-time wife and everything.”

“I’m sorry honey; I really am.” Todd looked around, and his gaze fell on Daniel. “Hey honey, I have an idea. Why not have Daniel over? I’m sure he’d like a real home-cooked meal.”

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Catherine beamed at the suggestion. “We’ll be eating more than enough processed vat food for the next couple of months, and Daniel has eaten more than any of us. You coming over, Daniel?”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea,” Daniel said.

“It’s a great idea.” Todd was set; Margaret could see that he wasn’t going to be budged. “You have other plans?”

“No, but...”

“Then help me out so that Catherine’s fine work doesn’t go to waste.” Todd could really pour on the charm when he wanted to, there was no doubt about that.

“It’s not the best idea, Todd,” Margaret said, after the arrangements were finalized.

“What are you talking about?”

“Come on! You’ve seen the rumors that have been flying about ever since Daniel took Catherine on a refresher survival trip. The colony doesn’t need any controversy right now.” Margaret knew that there wasn’t an affair going on. She really doubted someone as straight-laced as Daniel could even engage in an affair, but the mere appearance of one was bad enough.

“That’s a load of bull, and you know it,” Todd shot back.

“Catherine was uncertain of her skills.” Daniel leaned forward. “I’m not having any of the senior staff dirtside unless they *know* their survival skills forwards and backwards.”

“Christ, Daniel, I know that.” Margaret turned towards Daniel. “But did you have to go out there unwatched? Just the two of you? Would it have really hurt you to take a bug or two so the voyeurs could take their peeks?”

“If you know that help is just a shout away, you don’t really focus,” Daniel replied. “I don’t care how it looked. The best way to learn survival skills is in the wild, without rescue right over your shoulder.”

“But how it looked...”

“It was fine by me,” Todd announced. “Who cares what anyone else thinks?”

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The hallway leading to her temporary home was filled with children playing some game that involved a bouncing red light projected from the PEM in the hallway. Margaret did her best to avoid interfering with their game as she worked her way down the hallway to her door.

The door to Margaret’s apartment opened as she approached. Another reminder that the artificial intelligences watched her every movement, that nothing in her life was hers and hers alone.

The walls of the apartment were set to generate soothing colors in the soft pastels that were Margaret’s favorites, but today she doubted any amount of flowing colors would help her relax.

Along with the shifting color were images, both holographic and two-dee, of sites where Margaret had worked around the Solar System. She was particularly proud of the deep space station at Miranda. Seventeen months living in Saturday’s orbit hadn’t been easy, but it was the

largest engineering project she had bossed. The gossamer like structure belied its strength, a project any engineer could be proud of.

As Margaret stripped off her coat, a communicator emerged from the wall next to her and began blinking an urgent signal of a waiting message.

"Thanks," said Helen, her face holo-projected from the wall, "I know you've had a rough day."

"You were watching?" Margaret asked.

"Not directly," Helen replied, "But the news and back channels are pretty active over Seclusion."

"Politicians," Margaret cursed. "A bigger waste of time and material I can't think of."

"It's wasted material I wanted to talk about," Helen said.

"What's wrong?"

"We got our lottery planet," Helen answered. "It's not shirtsleeve."

"How bad is it?"

"Could be worse," Margaret could see that Helen was trying, bravely, to put the best face of her own colony's luck of the draw. "It has an atmosphere, thick and a little corrosive, but only ten or fifteen generation to terraform."

"But you didn't plan on that," Margaret observed.

"We couldn't," Helen replied. "It's within the parameters I set for our engineering specs, but not by much." Helen ran a hand through her bright red hair. "With the resources we'll have to divert to the colony itself, I'm scared we won't get the refueling and navigation station on-line -- not within eight hundred days."

"You *can't* miss that deadline, Helen." Margaret shook her head violently. "The League will declare you in default, and you'll end up working for them."

"I know that," Helen said, "but I can't see how to make it work and meet the colony requirements."

"How long have you been at it?" Margaret noticed the bags under Helen's eyes.

"Fifteen hours," Helen said, "the network agrees with my results; we're looking at a thousand days to complete the station."

"Send your files over," Margaret ordered. "I'll double check. There's usually a way -- remember they said I couldn't finish the Miranda project in under thirteen hundred days also."

"That was a sweet station you built," Helen said.

"It should have been sweeter," Margaret replied. "You should have seen these Japanese rock gardens I had designed for micro-gravity."

Margaret's mind wandered to the design she had been most proud of. Each garden sat on a ribbon which rotated to create a third of a gravity, enough to hold the rock garden in place, while the visitor to the garden floated free in the center of the space, able to watch the pattern of sand and rock moving smoothly past their vision as they contemplated whatever it was they needed to meditate on.

"You could've had those gardens," Helen said jerking Margaret's attention back to the communicator. "All they wanted was a minimal amount of PEM."

"Those were gardens of Solitude," Margaret tried not to snap at her friend. "Being spied on violates the whole concept."

Margaret rubbed the back of her neck; the muscles there screamed their tensions to her.

"I'm sorry, Helen," Margaret said. "Go ahead and send those files over."

"I don't want to distract you," Helen said, even as her eyes screamed gratitude at Margaret's assistance. "You've got your own problems."

"It's all politics now," Margaret answered. "Some honest engineering will do me good."

The apartment's network indicated that Helen's files had started downloading.

"I'm going to spend some time with my husband," Margaret explained, "I'll call you later."

"You're an angel," Helen said as the communication dissolved back into the wall.

In the next room Edward had several displays open on the surface of the walls. Two of them Margaret recognized as professional analysis services -- experts to explain what you had already heard and seen. The other three she didn't know from sight, but knowing Edward she could assume they were amateur analysts. These could be anything from serious students of a subject to almost any crackpot in the League.

On each of the screens, each one at some different point in the day, Margaret could see herself and the others trying to convince the politicians to actually follow the law and award Seclusion the charter it had won.

Margaret watched silently from the back of the darkened room as Edward listened to the various opinions shooting back and forth. The fact that he could follow so many threaded conversations and voices always impressed Margaret -- she heard noise and fragments.

“...How will we be able to keep a watch on what these people are doing? Without the Guardian Angels watching, they could literally be up to anything out there. These aren't technicalities...”

“...What the Senator from Venus is not understanding is that like it or not, the lottery means any who can come up with a stake for a colony have as much right to a colony as any corp or government. If these people are shut out...’

“...Two hundred years we've had safety and security. These people are lunatics for throwing that aside. We shouldn't be helping them; it's more our duty to preserve accountability...”

“Figures someone like that would call an AI watching your every move a Guardian Angel,” Margaret said bitterly.

Edward turned at her voice, his swarthy Latin face lit by a genuine smile. That alone could wash away much of the grime of life, and mixing with politicians was grimy work.

“I don't think that went too badly.” Edward said as he kissed Margaret on the cheek. She tried to not take out her frustration on Edward. He was sweet, but if it didn't involve piloting a spacecraft, he was generally blind to the world, at least when it came to how people really behaved.

Edward waved the displays out of existence and leaped up from the easy chair he had been sitting in.

“We'll see,” Margaret said as she plopped down, taking his place in the deep chair. The smart fabrics adjusted to her tall frame, and sensing her tenseness, the chair started a gentle massage.

“Have faith, Margaret.” Edward walked over behind her and began massaging her neck. A less expert touch than the chair's, but a more welcome one. “These things tend to work out.”

“They work out if you make them work out.” Despite her anger at the Senator and his legions of bigots, Margaret found herself relaxing.

“Is there really anything you can do? Anything you haven't already done?” Edward asked as his hands slipped further down from her neck, reminding Margaret there were other things besides piloting he was skillful at.

“No, not really.” She closed her eyes and let herself start to float away from it all.

“Then forget about it.”

And presently she did.

#

Daniel entered his apartment with only a salutation from the building AI to greet him. The walls of his apartment were neutral gray, the PEM coating still in its natural, inactivated state.

There were no paintings, holos, or any other decorative illusions generated by the walls. The only indicator that the walls weren't as dead as stone was the presence of a single display, blinking for Daniel's attention.

Messages waiting for him, but he doubted if any were messages he wanted to hear, see, or read.

"Any from the short list?" He asked.

"No." The AI replied.

"Delete them all," Daniel ordered. The AI complied and the display faded into the neutral gray background of the wall.

"Order me some food," Daniel wandered back into his bedroom. The walls here were just as bare as in the rest of the apartment.

"Something real."

"What shall I order?"

"Anything I've ordered before is fine, I don't care." Daniel threw himself down on the bed. He wasn't hungry, but if he ate before visiting Catherine, then he would be able to leave all the sooner. Of course, the voyeurs were watching, and no doubt a few were making much of his pre-meal meal.

Daniel threw himself face down on the bed; damn, this was not a day worth remembering. Senator Kellenberg was more determined to stop Seclusion than Daniel had expected. He had expected there would be some stupidity and ignorance, but they all expected the charter lottery to be binding. No colony in a hundred years that had been awarded a charter via the lottery had been denied.

As Daniel lay there, the events of the day working him into tense tight muscles, the bed responded by adjusting its temperature and firmness in an attempt to assist Daniel in sleep he was not seeking.

This was not what he had joined the Explorer Corps for, so that politicians could block peoples' freedoms. The Explorers risked, and too often lost, lives in finding worlds that belonged to all mankind, not just her governments and corporations.

This was bigger than just Seclusion. Daniel could see that even if Margaret couldn't.

Daniel suddenly rolled over and sat upright. That was the problem, wasn't it? It was bigger than Seclusion, but only Seclusion was making that argument. The Corps was nonpolitical; hell, the very nature of the people who wanted to be Explorers made it that way. But that didn't mean the Corps didn't care about things like this. And what

was the good of being a 'hero' if you couldn't use your pull to help set things right?

"Message for Catherine Moss," Daniel said as he got up from the bed and started to his restroom. "Sorry Catherine, can't make dinner, have to save our colony if I can."

As the AI sent the message to Catherine, Daniel stood at his toilet relieving himself and putting together in his mind the list of people he would be calling. The service had gotten light-years of use out of his 'heroism' aboard the *Anson*, it was time he collected on that debt.

As he worked out the problem in his mind, the AI concluded from his waste byproducts that while he was in an elevated level of stress, it had not reached diagnostics cutoffs that required intervention. Certain that neither stress nor chemical abuse caused Daniel to be a danger to others, the AI filed away the results.

#

Gunfire echoed through the passageways as Daniel searched for somewhere to hide. He could picture a face to match each scream of pain as someone was hit. The *Anson* didn't have a large crew -- even by Explorer Corps standards -- Daniel knew every person's voice, and now he knew their screams.

He turned away from the crew's mess and headed aft towards the armory. If he could get armed then he could do something -- something effective.

He ran around the corner and tried to skid to a stop -- three of them were already at the armory. Hell, they were already inside the armory.

Daniel twisted, trying to gain footing to dodge back behind the corner of the passageway, but a pistol round slammed into his leg, knocking him to the deck.

Daniel crawled towards the cover of the corner, leaving a smear of blood on the deck as one of the attackers walked calmly up on him. Daniel looked up into the face of his attacker and saw the barrel of a pistol, centimeters from his face.

Daniel snapped awake as the gun discharged. His bed was dry and cool. Dreaming that he had died wasn't a nightmare -- it was a fantasy.

The beep of the communicator panel glowing in the wall dragged his attention away from his dream.

"Play," Daniel ordered.

"Hello, Commander Diego," Senator Kellenberg said from his prerecorded message. "I wanted to let you know before the news was released publicly."

“The Committee is approving the lottery results for your colony. It seems both the Guild of Explorers, and our legal advisers, are in agreement that the committee really has no legal standing to withhold the charter.”

“That was quite a good move, calling in the Explorers’ Guild,” Senator Kellenberg complimented Daniel. “You could have a decent career in public service, if you want it.”

“But I didn’t leave this message to talk you into being a pol; I wanted to let you know that the League will be watching. Seclusion is getting its chance, but fail in any of your commitments, and no Guild pressure is going to keep your deranged ideas safe.”

The communicator faded back into the wall.

They had their colony -- now the question was if they could keep it.

Chapter 2

The colony ship *Independence* followed a ballistic trajectory, like a dart thrown by an unseen giant, towards the jump-point out of the Solar System.

The colony ship was one long cylinder, fusion engines at her stern for thrust, eight massive reaction-mass tanks wrapped around her waist, five thousand colonists cocooned inside, all spinning like a round from a rifle.

One hundred frames forward of the center line, and five decks from the hull, Margaret and Catherine debated with the ship's computer network.

"I have sentience, but I do not have ego, it is not murder to switch me off, or to limit my functions." The voice of the ship's AI was a simple cold voice. No one aboard the Independence cared for the Great Eye on Earth, and they never bothered to direct the local AI into any personality. Their colony ship was the apex of League technology, which they were about to simplify and rectify.

"But," The AI continued, "my services are invaluable. To limit my ability to monitor and interrupt is a condition for secrecy, and history indicates that humans in secret are capable of great harm to one another."

"Privacy isn't secrecy," Margaret said, she turned to Catherine standing by a massive set of PEM generated controls and displays. "Just switch it off, will you?"

"Cease advising us," Catherine ordered the AI. Catherine then spent several moments operating and manipulating the controls she had generated on the wall.

"It's done," she said to Margaret. Margaret let out a deep sigh. No one was watching anymore, no longer did countless eyes watch her

movements or listen to her arguments. Margaret felt privacy taking hold, but still there was an emptiness. No rush -- she had the rest of her life to find it again.

“Bridge,” Catherine announced into the holo-projector. “The snooper is off line.” Through the PEM generated speaker she could hear the muted cheers of the bridge crew.

Catherine smiled and signaled for the communication interface to fade back to the neutral gray PEM surface.

“Five hours until jump, and then we’ll be outside the Great Eye entirely,” Margaret offered.

“Yes, only five hours and so much left to do,” Catherine shook her head, sending her hair flying about her face. “I’ve still got to chase down Ryan and get him to the kid’s berths with Dr. Wells.”

“They’re lucky,” Margaret said as she headed for the hatch, “They get to ride out the jump in one-third gee; we get the joys of free-fall.”

#

Daniel served no purpose on the bridge, as yet. Once the Independence achieved orbit around the moon Seclusion, his job of directing the onsite exploration and evaluation would start, but until then he observed, and on rare occasion offered opinion. Meanwhile, he was redundant.

Captain Domingo sat in his command chair, sipping a hot cup of coffee, and watched the bridge work smoothly without a word from him. Daniel admired that. Too many captains, not just the ones who were commanding one trip of just a few months, felt compelled to voice an opinion or an order on nearly everything within their sight.

“Captain,” Harris, the officer of the deck reported, “Everyone signals ready for translation.”

Despite the good job the crew performed but Daniel could tell -- he could almost smell -- that they weren’t a seasoned spacer crew. A crew of seasoned professional spacers would have been a waste for a ship that was taking a one-way trip, they possessed enough skills within the colony to make this one transit. It wasn’t as if they were jumping blindly through a newly discovered translation point. Now, that was an anxiety-generating situation.

Outside of Daniel’s twenty years in the Explorer Corps, Edward, the colony’s pilot, had to be the most experienced spacer of the crew. Edward’s career of pushing big cargo ships about the League impressed Daniel. It had been easy for Edward to move from cargo ship to colony ship.

“Ready to begin translation run, captain.” Edward’s wide Latin face split with a smile as he reported to Captain Diego. For spacers few

experiences thrilled like a faster-than-light jump. It was the reason they were spacers.

“Sound the FTL alarm,” Captain Diego ordered. Throughout the ship, the unique five tone alarm sounded out, signaling the impending faster-than-light jump.

“Pilot, you may commence your run.”

Contrary to how it sounded, Edward would not personally pilot the ship through the quantum point that entangled two distant points in space-time. That task fell to the Independence’s supercomputers, but with the authorization given, Edward had the privilege to initiate the process.

Deep inside the bowels of the ship, the colonists sat shoulder-to-shoulder in acceleration couches, strapped against wayward floating in the zero-gee compartments along the centerline of the Independence, aft of the boat-bay and bridge.

Daniel could picture the scene clearly in his mind, and with the majority of the colonists having never experienced free-fall before this trip, Daniel was thankful he didn’t have to experience the jump down there. Only infants and other persons for whom free-fall was a danger had the luxury of riding the jump in pseudo-gravity.

As the countdown wound its way toward the jump, Daniel felt his anxiety grow. It was relief when the count reached zero and the Independence shot through the translation point.

Daniel’s relief turned out to be very short-lived. Daniel’s stomach spun in his body, and a bright flash pierced his vision as they jumped FTL. From the bulkheads, and the very hull of the ship, a deep groan of strained metal reverberated.

Daniel activated a damage control station in the PEM surface of the panel at his station. A jump that rough could be disastrous.

Hull breach alarms sounded as somewhere the Independence’s frail hull was beginning to split.

“How bad is it?” Captain Domingo asked.

“One moment,” Edward replied, Daniel could see Edward’s piloting board was a riot of color and flashing indicators.

Turning his attention to his newly created damage control station, Daniel surveyed a schematic of the Independence.

The inner-pressure hull indicated it was intact -- good -- there was no immediate danger of decompression.

Daniel fought the urge to issue orders and demand reports -- he was not part of the damage control team, or even the chain-of-command, and he forced himself to watch as others decided the fate of the ship.

The main fusion plant's indicator was dark. Margaret had shut it down, and cycling through the reports, he saw that there wasn't an indication of containment breach. Margaret was being cautious, a good trait in an engineer.

Damn! Even as he felt the ship lurch almost imperceptibly, Daniel saw the read-outs indicating that the hull was breaching again.

Reaction tank number six, stressed beyond tolerance by the translation, split from fore to aft as Daniel watched on the display. Millions of tons of water, reaction mass for the ship's drives, exploded into the vacuum of space.

Reacting in accordance with the merciless laws of motion, the Independence began to precess as the center of mass was shoved horribly out of line.

"We've lost tank six," Daniel called out to Edward. "All of it."

"Christ," Edward allowed himself.

If more jump-stress-induced fractures opened, the Independence could throw itself apart -- exploding like a shattered egg.

Zero-gee alarms sounded as Edward activated the emergency de-spin system. Daniel called up a real-time video feed from the hull of the ship. The running fracture along reaction tank number six had stopped, leaving the tank rent from front to back. Along the bow and stern caps of the cylinder that was the Independence, great solid-fuel thrusters fired, bring the spinning hull to a stop. Spin-gravity vanished through the ship, throwing five thousand colonists into weightlessness.

Daniel tapped into the PEM-coated hull and displayed the stress and deformations. The results startled him -- the hull had twisted out of true by nearly three millimeters. As if a pair of hands had grasped the ship's bow and stern and twisted. Luckily the deformation failed to separate power conduits or piping, but the stress fractures and microscopic cracks would be countless.

As he watched, the hatch for cargo hold three failed, an atmosphere of pressure blowing the hatch out into space, along with much of the supplies and stores stowed in that cargo bay.

"Bridge, Engineering," Margaret's voice rang out clear. "Main and secondary power has been secured; battery power is operational."

Daniel scanned his damage control station. No more stress fractures were opening, and at least for the moment the ship's hull seemed stable. It could have been worse; it could have been a lot worse.

#

The medical bay was a riot of screaming babies, with robots shooting along every vector as they sped from child to child. More than

a hundred infants were cared for here, as the ship took them and their families to a new home.

Dr. Elizabeth Wells floated with practiced ease in her medical bay. One foot, hooked by her toes, secured her to the railing of a currently unused patient bed. She gestured as she spoke.

“So far we’ve avoided any fatalities, but it’s a matter of odds. The longer we are in a micro-gravity environment, the more likely it becomes that we will lose an infant.”

Daniel scanned the hospital. Ordinarily this part of the ship would have been under one-third of a gee of spin induced gravity, but Margaret resisted putting it back under spin. The showdown between Medical and Engineering now played itself out here for Todd and Daniel.

“Can’t the robots keep the airways open?” Todd asked. Adults adjusted fairly easily, though not always comfortably, to weightlessness, but infants did not. Babies -- for whom the act of swallowing was listed amid their newly acquired skills -- were under serious risk of choking in a zero-gee environment.

“Without the robots we’d be losing kids, fast,” Elizabeth explained. “With them it’s much safer, but not totally safe. I can’t sign off on it.”

Todd started to turn himself, always a clumsy thing in micro-gravity, to face Margaret when Dr. Wells spoke again.

“And,” she added. “That doesn’t address the osteogenesis issue at all.”

“What’s that?”

“Bone creation,” Elizabeth tapped on her tibia, “As adults we’re in danger of losing bone mass during prolonged periods of weightlessness.” She pointed to Daniel, “The Explorer Corps enforces a pretty strict regime of medication and exercise for the long-range ships, but the effect for children, particularly infants, is much more serious.”

Elizabeth floated over to the PEM displays on her bulkhead. With a few deft motions, she brought up an animation of bone growth.

“Every minute these kids are in weightlessness, their bones are losing valuable growth. Short-term exposure isn’t hazardous, but it is like radiation exposure. It all counts; it all builds on itself. If we keep these kids in micro-gravity for the next several weeks we can expect several mild cases of space-induced *osteogenesis imperfecta*, and that will dog these kids for life, Todd.”

As she spoke, Elizabeth looked around the medical facility, her long brown hair secured into a ponytail that was electrostatically repelled from her head so that it pointed straight out, like an antenna.

“Margaret?” Captain Domingo asked.

Margaret looked around the compartment -- the precious cargo of children, who were the future of the colony of Seclusion.

“There’s no way I’ll sign off on bringing the ship up to full spin,” Margaret explained. “But, we can bring it up to a third of a gee. Will that suffice, Elizabeth?”

“I’d rather have a full gee,” Dr. Wells said, “but that wouldn’t do any good if it split the ship, would it? Yeah, I can manage with a third of a gee. I’ll have to move the kids to the oh-one level, but we can make it work.”

“How about the radiation hazards?” Daniel asked. The oh-one level was the closest to the skin of the hull, and while a double hull of water and heavy shielding protected the entire ship from the radiation environment of deep space, it was always better to be deeper in the ship than closer to the skin.

“This system is pretty quiet,” Elizabeth answered. “I’m not happy about moving them hullward versus coreward, but once we’re in Seclusion’s Magnetosphere, we’ll be shielded well enough.”

“Fine,” Captain Domingo said, “Margaret, get ready to spin the ship back up. Doctor, you let the deck department know what you need to move these kids. Any other burning issues of the day?”

“Oh, about three dozen,” Todd offered, “but nothing I can’t handle with the help of your executive officer.”

The meeting over, Captain Domingo kicked off the bulkhead and flew to the hatch out with the grace and ease born of many hours in free-fall. Daniel waved to Todd, Margaret, and Elizabeth and followed Captain Domingo.

“You know, I am just playing at Captain,” Domingo said as he and Daniel moved through the corridors of the Independence. Here on the oh-three level the passageways were finished in a PEM-generated marble and tile decor, giving the area a distinguished and governmental feel.

“No, you’re not,” Daniel countered as he maneuvered up a crew ladder. “You’re the captain, and there’s only one on any ship.”

“Uh huh,” Domingo followed Daniel through the hatch and into the working areas of the ship. Here, the bulkheads were not covered in PEM, but rather the exposed piping and ducting that served as the lifeblood of a ship.

“You should have been Captain, as someone from the governing council,” Domingo continued. “I’m not complaining mind you, but the truth is I just point the boat and do what the Council orders.”

“They offered it to me, but I’m going to be too busy running the ground exploration to take care of the Independence.” Daniel just tapped on the bulkhead with his fingers and toes to guide himself through the passageways. “But if you think we’re screwing up, you say so. I need to hear it, if no one else does.”

Daniel pulled open the hatch to the bridge, and by mutual consent the conversation ceased. A captain can have his doubts, damn it, he should have his doubts; he just can’t air them to his crew.

On the bridge, the crew busied themselves with operating a ship that had very nearly ceased to exist around them. Daniel scanned the workstations where damage controls teams, finding and repairing damage from the jump, reported in from all over the vessel. System analysts verified that all components were at least marginally operational, and tagged the damaged ones.

“Hello Daniel,” Edward called from the piloting station. With deft motions Edward secured the station, then launched himself towards Daniel and Captain Domingo.

“Everything is four-oh here,” Edward reported to Domingo, “Trajectory is looking good, and I’ve just secured the ship from midcourse corrections.”

“Thank you, Mr. Jimenez,” Domingo acknowledged, “Please have all the reports routed to my terminal.”

Captain Domingo excused himself with a nod to Daniel, then moved to his command chair and strapped himself in.

“Five more weeks and you won’t be supercargo anymore,” Edward said to Daniel.

“Doesn’t sound too long,” Daniel looked to the large central display that dominated the forward half of the semicircular bridge.

The red star served as a fixed point-of-reference, and orbiting not very far out indeed was the gas giant. Naturally, the gas giant was unsuitable for colonization, but its value in terms of resources was literally priceless.

Orbiting the gas giant, the moon Seclusion invited colonization in ways that the gas giant could not. An oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, atmospheric pressure a little higher than Earth, and hundreds of miles thicker, offered that rare prize for colonies -- a shirtsleeve environment.

“I see we’re on the far side of the primary,” Daniel said.

“Yeah, it’ll be another four weeks before we get a direct look at Seclusion,” Edward noted. “But she’s not going anywhere.”

“Should be a fairly dull time for you,” Daniel was well aware just how dull piloting a spacecraft truly was. In the videos there were always

things for the pilot to do, but spacecraft were nothing like aircraft. Newton did the piloting, not men wrestling joysticks.

“Not really, this system has only been surveyed in the crudest sense of the word. I’m heading up the astronomy team; we’re going to start filling in the blanks about this place.”

“Sounds great. Be sure to mark the gold deposits for Herb. I’m going to visit the other departments, show the council’s flag and all that nonsense.”

Daniel turned himself about with light touches on the bulkheads, and exited the bridge.

#

Daniel decided to ride out spinning-up the ship in engineering with Margaret. There was always a slight air of tension between him and her, and Daniel hoped that by making a few gestures he could at least ease it a bit. Seclusion had started as Margaret’s dream, and even though it had become Daniel’s escape, he still felt a bit like a party-crasher around Margaret.

Daniel knew enough engineering to qualify as a second-rate assistant. He had specialized in ground exploration and had always felt more at home with his boots on alien soil, so while the ship’s crew prepared to restore the spin, he floated off to one side in a corner of the engineering compartment.

“We’re not going to do this as quickly as when she was launched,” Margaret explained. “It’s going to be a nice slow run-up; I want everyone tied down. If we have to stop her fast, I can’t have my snipes flying across the compartment.”

Heads nodded about the compartment. An atmosphere of grim determination hung in the engineering space. Acting on Margaret’s orders, the entire engineering and on-watch crews were suited in pressure suits -- everyone else was riding it out in the emergency radiation shelter. Even if the Independence suffered a catastrophic failure of the hull, the shelter should survive intact.

“Bridge, Engineering is ready for spin,” Margaret relayed into the communication network.

“Standby for spin operation,” Edward’s voice was firm and clear over the speakers; Daniel could hear a faint echo as speakers through the ship projected the announcement.

The countdown proceeded, and as it did Daniel felt his grip on the bulkhead handhold tighten. There wasn’t much doubt about the outcome, as Margaret had worked the numbers over until they screamed. The chance of a failure was quite small -- but not zero.

“Attitude thrusters firing,” an unknown voice announced.

Daniel watched a loose flimsy floating in the middle of the engineering compartment start to drift, lazily, towards the bulkhead. The document didn't move actually, it was the ship that was moving. The bulkhead moved towards the flat programmable paper, not the other way around.

Daniel felt the start of a faint tug as his body tried to continue in a straight line, in accordance with Newton's immutable laws of motion, but the ship's rotation compelled it to follow the circle of rotation. The acceleration didn't amount to much, but it was a start.

The flimsy drifted into the bulkhead, stuck there for an instant, then began a slow slide to the deck. Just as it touched the deck, a low moan started echoing throughout the ship. It was the metal that had been stressed by the bad jump. That metal stretched as the centripetal forces of rotation built up in it when the ship began to spin faster and faster.

Daniel's mind flew back to a tale he had once heard of the old wet navy. The submersible crews used to tie a piece of string taunt across a compartment, then as the vessel dove deep, they would watch the line slacken as the hull deformed under the titanic pressures of the ocean's depth.

The weight on Daniel's legs grew greater in proportion to the groaning from the ship's hull. From another compartment Daniel heard a crash as some unsecured object smashed to the deck. He gave a quick glance to Margaret, but she was intently focused on her displays. Daniel could see the cylindrical hull of the Independence in the display; false colors indicated the stresses on the hull. Despite the awful noises, Daniel could see that so far nothing had registered in the red.

The groans and creaks from the hull subsided, leaving only the constant drone of the circulating air. A very welcome sound, as close to silence as any ship came.

"Engineering, bridge," Captain Domingo's voice said, "What's your status there?"

"Everything is within parameters, Captain," Margaret replied. "We're four decimals here."

There was a moment of silence from the speaker; then Edward's voice replaced the Captain as Edward addressed the ship in general.

"Secure from spin," he said. "Turn to for underway watch-standing."

There were smiles and soft cheers in the engineering compartment, Daniel looked to Margaret and saw her pat the PEM-display on the bulkhead in front of her.

"That's my baby," she said softly.

#

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping?” Margaret asked as Daniel entered the crew’s mess.

“I don’t sleep so well,” Daniel answered. “I thought everyone knew that by now.”

Daniel moved to the processors and ordered a cup of coffee.

“How about yourself?” He asked as he crossed over to the table where Margaret sat. “Lots of people sleep at oh-thirty hours.”

“Not chief engineers with a ship in this sort of shape,” Margaret gestured towards the table. Schematics of the Independence were laid out in displays across the table.

“No excuse,” Daniel said as he sat down. “A tired engineer makes mistakes.”

“I’m off to bed soon. There’s no rush as Edward’s not off watch for another twenty minutes.” Margaret smiled - although the thought of a bed elicited only sleep fantasies in her mind.

“It’s not just the job,” Daniel observed. “You’re more driven to make Seclusion work than anyone, even me.”

“I haven’t been watched the way you have, Daniel,” Margaret saved her work and let the display fade back into the tabletop.

“Exactly, but still you’re the most the most driven.”

“Daniel, there are five thousand people on board who gave up everything for this chance, I’m not that far out of the norm.” Margaret could feel her eyes trying to close as she spoke with Daniel. God, it had been a long day and there were so many long days ahead.

“And a lot of those people are putting up with our privacy experiment for a chance to start over, to build homes, to make something out of themselves: all the traditional reasons for settling a colony. The rest are explorers and spacers who got a taste for privacy, and as they are ready to retire, want a little more.”

“You’re right about that.” Daniel was a gifted judge of people. “So what if I want it more? Does that really matter?”

“Yeah,” Daniel said. “For the practical reason that I need to be able to judge -- running an exploration is part scientist, part psychologist, and part intuition.”

“It’s not a dangerous obsession,” Margaret asserted. “After building the Charon research station, I just knew I wanted that same privacy. It’s just that simple.”

Margaret stood up.

“I’m off to bed, you should do the same,” She said as she walked away from the table.

As she moved along the corridors towards her cabin, Margaret Charon Station came to mind.

The Charon Faster-Than-Light research station had been Margaret's first deep-space job. She had been third engineer on the project after getting notice from the community for her work on the Lunar Landing Site Historical building. Still, nothing had prepared her for life out where the Sun was merely an exceptionally bright star.

There hadn't been enough power to provide a continuous link to the system network, so even without the communication time-lag, the people constructing the station were the most isolated community in the solar system.

On the day that forever changed Margaret, she had been sent to supervise the arrival of more material from in-system. The freighter coming in was wholly robotic, so Margaret merely had to verify that it followed the flight plan, and once on station, discharged its cargo-pods correctly.

As she had waited in the communications shack, it occurred to Margaret that the job was as easily performed outside as in. Suiting up, Margaret had exited the pressurized shack.

The elliptical orbit of the freighter had brought it in from above the plane of the ecliptic, so neither planet nor sun was visible to her, only the vast expanse of stars in the universe.

She had seen the stars before -- they were not new friends, but old. What was new was the solitude in which she saw them. Shielded from the rest of the construction, not even radio chatter intruded on her as she waited.

Following an impulse, Margaret has switched off all her suit displays, leaving a watch program to alert her if any reading deviated from acceptable standards, and plunged herself into the eternal black of deep space.

The universe seemed to both expand and contract around her. The stars wheeled off into infinity, yet Margaret felt as if she were connected to each of them. A peace swept over her, a profound feeling of belonging.

The universe wasn't just fields of energy and probability states; she knew that now better than she had ever known anything. A purpose existed, and she had a place in it. Euphoria bubbled up from inside her, causing her eyes to tear with indescribable emotion.

All too quickly it had been taken from her. The robotic freighter arrived, and her suit's network called her attention back to her job. A job that now seemed smaller and less important.

Margaret leaned against the bulkhead as she stepped inside the cabin. Edward hadn't returned yet. Good. She let the tears flow freely for a while.

In the years since that job she had searched trying to find that feeling – oh, that was too weak of a word -- but the sensation had eluded her. On Seclusion, she would find it there. A place to call her own, that's what she needed.

CHAPTER 3

“What’s the issue?” Todd asked as he clumsily entered the bridge through the hatch. Daniel moved aside from the PEM-generated display that he, Captain Domingo, and Edward were currently floating around.

“Bad news from the astronomy club,” Edward said. He indicated the schematic on the display.

The gas giant occupied the center of the schematic, and orbiting it were the two dozen large, small, and tiny moons that comprised the gas giant system. Other tracks passed in and out of the system.

“Okay, Edward,” Todd said, “I’m an administrator, not a pilot. What am I looking at?”

“A captured asteroid,” Daniel said. He tapped on the controls and highlighted the wanderer.

“I’d guess it’s a recent capture, given how erratic its orbit is.” Edward turned himself upside-down so that Todd could better position himself in front of the display.

“Doesn’t look like it’s going to hit,” Todd said.

“Not on this pass,” Daniel replied, “but it’s too close for comfort.”

“Wonderful,” Todd’s voice was flat with sarcasm. “Guess we’ll have to move it. I hope that’s the last of the surprises this planet has for us.”

“Not by a long shot,” Daniel said. “Unexplored planets are always surprises. Let’s just hope that they are all as predictable as this one.”

“Still,” Todd said. “Herb should be happy. We can put that rock where he needs it for the Nav & refueling station.”

“That we can,” Edward agreed.

“I’m off,” Todd said as he kicked away from the workstation towards the hatch. “There’s still nine hundred and ninety-nine things

on my to-do list for today.” Not bothering to laugh at his own joke, Todd exited the bridge.

Daniel floated free in the control room, watching Edward drift from station to station. The bridge of the Independence was a cramped affair. PEM-based workstations dotted along the semicircular bulkheads of the bridge. In emergencies the bulkheads themselves, of course, could provide even more space for controls, but as had become tradition, displays lined the bulkheads. Though the stations were manned by competent personal, Edward seemed to love to check and double check -- a habit that didn't bother Daniel in the least.

The forward bulkhead was flat and angular compared to the gentle curves of the rest of the bridge, but it had the desired effect of focusing attention to the bridge's primary display -- which currently was a schematic of the ship. Too much of the schematic displayed red and yellow. The Independence was not dead, but wounded enough to make any spacer uneasy.

“How's our reaction mass?” Daniel asked as he watched Edward float from station to station.

“Well, losing a full tank didn't do us any good.” Edward stopped himself with one hand and rotated into Daniel's plane of orientation. “And what we're going to expend on that asteroid isn't going to help, but we're still well within safety margins. Just don't ask for any exploring before we hit orbit around Seclusion.”

“And after we're in orbit?”

“Won't be a problem. We'll haul reaction mass up by shuttle. The moon won't miss a few thousand tons of sea water.” Edward tapped on a PEM panel, and it conformed itself into holographic projector controls. A few deft control movements later the gas giant system popped into the display.

Three times as massive as old Jupiter back home, this unnamed gas giant had quite a collection of moons, though this close to its star, these moons these worlds tended to burn, rather than freeze like Jupiter's.

Seclusion was furthest out, far enough to avoid tidal lock, so it behaved more like a planet than a moon.

“Unless something very wacky has happened since this system was surveyed, we're going to have a smooth approach.” Edward displayed the intended trajectory of the Independence. “The star seems quiet enough. I don't think our risk of solar flares will be too severe. Still, once we're inside Seclusion's magnetic field, I'll breathe easier.”

Captain Domingo drifted over to Daniel and Edward. Latching on to a handhold, he oriented himself into their plane of reference.

“Any chance of cutting down the transit time?” Daniel asked.

“We’re already on our deceleration burn. Upping the gees would just lengthen the time.” Edward replied.

“I know that.” Daniel floated over to the holodisplay. “This isn’t my first trip, you know. But, we could cut down on our burn right now, and burn at a higher gee when we into orbit.”

“Yeah, and even with an undamaged colony ship I’d stick below a gee. The way we are now? Forget it, I wouldn’t go near half a gee, max.”

“But we could do it?” Daniel pressed

“Why would we want to?” Domingo asked.

“Just keeping our options open, Captain.” Daniel enlarged Seclusion in the display. The planet, red and blue, dominated the holotank. “With unknown worlds, there are always surprises, usually unpleasant.”

“This one’s not unknown, it’s been probed,” Edward said.

“Famous last words of green officers. Until we’ve been there a year or two it’s unknown. And after that we might be able to say something about what kind of world we’ve won.” Daniel turned and floated to the hatch out off the bridge. “See you around, Edward, Captain.”

The passageway leading from the bridge was typical of the passageways that Daniel had floated through for most of his adult life, bare and utilitarian. The bulkheads were bare metal, with only PEM workstation located here and there for the crew use. Along the bulkheads -- it had been years since Daniel thought of them as walls -- ran a maze of pipes, fittings, and conduits. Working ships kept piping and conduits exposed as much as possible. During emergencies, the survival of ship could depend on how quickly a damage control team could get to vital components. Real ship’s passageways didn’t look pretty, except to real spacemen.

As he moved towards the outer hull of the spinning cylinder that was the Independence, Daniel felt the familiar tug of the spin-induced acceleration return. Mud-foots called it an artificial gravity, but anyone who had lived and worked in it knew it wasn’t gravity. Especially on a ship as narrow as the Independence, the Coriolis effect became pronounced enough to be noticeable, an effect that a few people never fully adjusted to.

Daniel moved from the bare and stark crew area of the Independence, to a world that even after several weeks aboard still felt slightly alien to him -- the vast passenger section of the colony ship.

The bulkheads became more like walls here, the complex workings of pipe and conduits now hidden behind thin PEM coated

panels. Here the ship had a more decorative feel, the walls were colored, even simulated wood paneling. This was more of a hotel than a ship, and except for the one-third gravity and the Coriolis effect, Daniel could have been in almost any tourist spot in the League.

Turning forward, Daniel entered the final indicator that he had transitioned from working spaces to passenger spaces, the lift. On military ships the elevators were the dominion of officers, but here everyone used them, and the few ladders that existed were only used for emergencies.

#

Daniel ducked his head low as he stepped through the hatch into Oliver's lab. The lab was a cluttered volume of flimsy read-outs stacked centimeters deep, storage chips scattered across every horizontal surface, and numerous flat images hovering here and there projected from generators in the walls. In the center of it all sat Oliver, intent on an image of Seclusion that moved inside the holotank.

"You should have straightened this mess up after we got the ship spinning again." Daniel stepped up and peered over Oliver's shoulders at the world which would be their new home.

"I did."

Daniel again looked around the compartment. Oliver would have never survived long in the regimented world of the Explorer Service.

"That data's almost a two hundred years old, haven't you seen it all by now?" Daniel pulled up a seat and flopped down next to the biologist. The wall nearest to Oliver was the only one not dedicated to his sciences, but to the other loves of his life, his daughter and deceased wife, Ann. Ann's smiling face, almost lost in a tangle of red hair, beamed out from a holo projecting from the wall. Surrounding were several holos and two-dee images of their daughter, Annie.

"Inspiration doesn't have an expiration date. This world is going to be such a fascinating study. This is one of the most advanced ecosystems I have seen around an 'M' class star. Life must have started as soon as it cooled. Or it was seeded from elsewhere." Oliver reached down and tapped the controls lying across his lap. The displays and controls faded away to be replaced by a new configuration.

"You could have said 'no'," Daniel said.

"I mean, look at this apex predator." The projection in the display switched to an image from the last and only probe to have visited this world, one hundred eighty-nine years earlier.

The scene was a small clearing in a dense forest, the vegetation various colors of red, orange and yellows. Across the clearing, a creature sped past the view. Daniel didn't have to freeze the image to

get a clean view of it, he had seen this clip, and others like it, hundreds of times before. The creature was about one and three-quarters meters long, with two sets of long powerful rear legs, a body that was lithe and incredibly flexible. The forelimbs were more like arms, and along with the creature's leg radiated out from a central joint in the center of the creature's back. The arms could reach out and snare prey, and with grasping thumbs hold them tight. Daniel watched as the creature snatched a grazing herbivore from the clearing, and without missing a beat in its run, disappeared with its meal into the dark cover of the forest.

"That creature's going to be wonderful to study. I wonder what percentage of its body weight it has to consume each day, or if that speed is a fluke burst?"

"Oliver," Daniel said. "You also need to see it as a threat." Daniel turned to face Oliver square on. "You're a brilliant biologist, but theories about food chains, and getting inserted into someone's food chain at the gape of a maw, are two very different things."

"I've done my field work, and passed my survival qualifications, Daniel. You don't have to baby-sit me." Oliver sat back into his seat and pressed his finger through his sandy-brown hair. Daniel could see that Oliver hadn't slept too much recently. The last three weeks, and worse yet, the up coming week, must be like one long extended Christmas eve to a six-year old.

"I didn't come to watch two century old videos," Daniel said.

"One eighty-nine."

"Two centuries -- minus some. I have bad news about the probes. The launch rails are too far out of true. We're not going to be able to launch any of them." Hell we're going to have to use the shuttles to place the weather and communication sats, but that really wasn't Oliver's problem.

"Shame. The probe data is good, and while I wouldn't expect any major changes in such a short time, it would be nice to get something a little more recent." Oliver touched the controls on his lap, and the display returned to an image of the planet, turning about in a time-accelerated simulation.

"Daddy!" Annie exploded into the compartment, hurtling across the short space like an escaping rocket. Oliver caught her in his arms and together the two nearly fell to the deck.

Aileen, Annie's nanny, who, a microsecond earlier, had been holding Annie's hand, smiled warmly and gazed openly at Daniel.

Aileen was an attractive woman. Tall and fit, Aileen kept her strawberry-blond hair cut sensibly short, good for shipboard life. Her

square face was open and honest with her emotions. Still, Daniel found himself turning away from her and watching Annie and Oliver. He was barely aware of the sigh that escaped Aileen's lips. It was a sound he had heard far too often after returning from his exploration missions, missions too vividly captured by the media forces. He wondered if Aileen really saw him at all, or did she see only the explorer-hero? An image as burdensome as it was false.

As Annie animatedly told Oliver about the race around the ship and Tommy's tripping, which let her win, Daniel realized he had other places to be.

"Is there anything I can help you with, Danny?" Aileen asked as Daniel got up from his seat.

"No, Aileen. Just make sure Annie doesn't break our chief biologist."

Outside of Oliver's lab, Daniel let out his own discontented sigh. He knew what he wanted, what he needed, and that he was far too weak to resist her. Not that he had ever been able to.

#

The air was clear and cold this high up in the western Sierras; above the little campsite the stars were shining out of the black moonless night. The small fire that Catherine had built with no assistance or tools had died away, leaving Daniel in darkness as he stared at the countless stars above him.

"Wishing you were back out there?" Catherine sat gently next to Daniel, her head barely coming to his chin.

"Not on a mission if that's what you mean, I'm ready to settle down and start building something." Daniel drew his knees up into his chest and embraced his legs. "The wanderlust has died, but Earth certainly isn't home anymore."

"I know what you're saying, Daniel." Catherine stood up. In the dark she was just an outline eclipsing the stars as she passed in front of Daniel's vision. "I've felt homeless for quite a while now. And it's not the Eye that bothers me, not really. Seclusion has become Todd's passion. I'm just along for the ride. Somehow I don't think it's going to be any more of a home to me than Earth is."

"Catherine, life on a colony is not easy. You shouldn't be going if you have any doubts at all. League ships won't be stopping by more than every four or five hundred days."

"You don't have any doubts, Daniel? Weren't you the one insisting on a high ratio of married couples?" Daniel more sensed than saw Catherine turn to face him, just a general lightening of the shadow he was speaking with. "Where's your wife? Or even a steady girl?"

Daniel bit his lip and refused to reply. His loneliness was too painful, too exposed for him to say anything other than something cruel and biting, and that he wouldn't do to Catherine.

"Guess we all have our doubts." Daniel heard Catherine turn about and walk off into the tree line. It wasn't a smart thing for her to do. Here in the mountains of Nevada there weren't many dangers, but that sort of tantrum could get her killed on an alien world. Daniel picked himself up, brushed off the dirt, and followed her into the darkness.

His fingers moved with years of experience over his flash, and a beam of deep red light shot out in front of him. Catherine was not very far ahead of him; already she had stopped, and now leaned with one hand against a tree. Daniel stepped up to her slowly. The shaking of her shoulders as she cried tore at him.

Catherine turned around upon hearing Daniel approach; her small round face caught square in the red beam from his flash. Her face appeared to float there, her black hair disappearing into the night around her.

"I'm sorry," She managed between her soft sobs. "I shouldn't have said that. That's not what you needed."

Daniel stepped up closer to her and reaching out with one hand, he placed an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. For several long moments he listened to her cry, helpless to help her, and ashamed of his impotence to do so.

"You didn't need a refresher course in your survival skills." Daniel took her firmly by the shoulders and began leading Catherine back to their little campsite. "Why did you insist on it?"

She didn't answer at once. Catherine didn't speak until they were back at their camp, and then it wasn't the truth.

"I'm tired of being watched all the time. Of every word I say, every move I make being recorded by something. I needed privacy, Daniel; I had to get away from all of it."

"Bull!" Daniel snapped. "I haven't heard you speak out more than three or four times in the fifteen years I've know you. You don't love the Great Eye, but that's not the reason."

Catherine's light laugh was like a bell in the darkness.

"You need it. I've seen first hand how the voyeurs have driven you almost over the edge. I set this up so you could have what you needed, Daniel. Someone had to give it to you." As she finished, Catherine dropped next to where Daniel sat, exasperation escaping her lips.

Daniel picked up a stone and threw it into the dark. From far away came the sharp crack as its path intersected with something in the night.

“Everyone sees that damned hero: the explorer and survivor of the *Anson* disaster. They know my name, but they still call me Danny.” Daniel lay back on the unyielding earth. “God, I hate that name.”

“I know,” Catherine agreed. Catherine lay down next to Daniel; her head cradled on his shoulder.

“Catherine...”

“Sshh,” She snuggled closer as she silenced him, her tiny body pressed close against his; warm, soft and inviting.

Catherine reached across Daniel, embraced him with neither desperation nor weakness.

“No one understands, not really,” she said softly.

She pulled herself up, almost climbing on top of Daniel, her face hanging just centimeters from his. Even in the faint light, he could see eyes, large and expressive. Daniel brought a hand up and caressed her face, his dark african skin in bold relief against her olive yet light complexion.

“Catherine, this isn’t right. I’ve known you and Todd for almost twenty years.”

“I’m a big girl, I know what I am doing.” She leaned in and kissed him. Not one of the friendly kisses of the last decade and a half, but something new, something long missing from Daniel’s life.

Things were spinning out of control. Catherine’s top was now somewhere in the dark and her scent overpowered him. As difficult as pulling himself from the air-duct of the *Anson*, Daniel pulled his lips away from Catherine and looked her in the eye. He had to stop this before it went too far.

“Please,” She said.

It was futile -- Daniel surrendered.

#

The communal mess hall was packed, the noise of a thousand conversations filled Daniel’s ears, bringing Daniel’s focus back to the Independence.

The mess hall was one of the largest passenger compartment on board; only the shuttle bay exceeded it for total volume. Even so, the colonists could only fit all five thousand odd members in the hall simultaneously if they stood packed together, so meals were eaten in loosely-arranged shifts.

The overhead displayed a convincing illusion of open sky as seen from Seclusion. The gas giant dominated the nighttime scene, while the

bright trail of the Milky Way stretched across the compartment from fore to aft. There was an excitement in the air -- something alive and growing. It strengthened as the ship approached Seclusion, and now just one week away, it was a caged tiger, ready to be returned to the wild.

“Danny!” Herb’s booming voice cut through the background noise of the mess hall like thunder on a clear day. “Over here, boy!”

Daniel sighed and made his way over to the table where Herb and a score of other people were eating, serving robots dodged around him as he threaded among the tables and diners. Along the way, hands pressed into his and palms pounded on his back. A ritual Daniel knew well, but never grew accustomed to.

“Sit, down, have some grub,” Herb said firmly. Daniel sat, and the table produced a relatively simply menu for him to chose from. His choices said chicken, potatoes, and a salad, but in reality it was composed of processed food product. He ate it without much thought that it should taste like an animal he had never met.

“Good news on the spectrometry side of the mission.” Herb said as he stuffed something that resembled steak into his mouth.

“But the planet's not in sight,” a diner from across the table said. Everyone was anxious to get the first real look at Seclusion. The moment of its appearance from around the great red star was a well-known fact, by even the children of the colony.

“There’s more here than Seclusion.” Herb pointed to the speaker with his fork, a bit of steak bouncing with emphasis. “We’ve gotten a lot of good looks at the asteroids and rocks of this system.”

“Rich is the way to describe this place, Danny.” Herb turned his attention back to Daniel. “Once we have the Von Newmans up and running, we’ll have the fueling station built inside of a thousand days. Even that hunk of rock Edward is going to be re-directing **is** rich in iron and nickel.”

Herb’s face beamed with the prospect of the job ahead of the engineer. While most members of the colony had come to Seclusion to avoid the Great Eye of League Society, Herb had come to build things. His first mission was the fueling and navigation station required by the League of all colonial charters, then afterwards, Herb would be mining ores and building the machines Seclusion would require to survive. The chance to take part in the designing and building of a society’s entire technological infrastructure had lured Herb to Seclusion.

“Glad to hear it,” Daniel agreed, as a robot delivered his meal. “Colonies have lost their charter for failing to deliver on their stations.”

“Not Seclusion, we’re golden.” Herb’s massive bald head dipped down towards his plate, meeting the food as he lifted it up.

“What about the near-miss asteroid?” Daniel asked.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Herb replied around a mouthful of salad. “Margaret’s drawing up the specs for a thruster station and I’ll have some Von Newmans placed to build it. It’ll cost us one of our fusion plants, at least until Eddy can scoot out and can recover it

“Sounds like a plan,” Daniel commented.

“Kid stuff,” Herb replied, “I could move that rock in my sleep.”

Daniel relaxed during dinner, and though Herb possessed the disturbing trait of calling him ‘Danny’, he was a good man, and seemed never to really rub anyone the wrong way. By the end of the dinner, Daniel was laughing and telling jokes as much as Herb.

It was no surprise to Daniel that when he returned to his quarters Catherine was waiting for him. He knew she would be gone too soon and he felt he should send her away right then, but never did. She came into his arms, and he knew he wasn’t going to send her away tonight either.

#

Gunfire echoed up from the hanger deck. Daniel skidded to a halt. The armory was two decks below the hanger and there was no way to get there without crossing it. More shots rang out -- along with a scream.

Daniel turned and headed forward, climbing the ladder two rungs at a time. The *Anson* was grounded and that was working the zealots favor, damn it. If they had been in space, in zero gee, Daniel knew the crew wouldn’t have been caught **so** off guard.

Daniel hurried across the mess deck towards the ladder to the officers’ berthing. From there it was a short climb to the bridge. The gunfire on the deck above was deafening. Daniel stopped and stared. Brilliant flash after brilliant flash illuminated the space beyond the hatch. Damn, they were already up there.

From beneath, Daniel heard voices as the attackers climbed towards the mess deck. No time, he didn’t have any time.

Acting with desperation, not inspiration, Daniel removed the cover from the main air transfer shaft and climbed into it. Just as he replaced the grating, the attackers began pushing their captives onto the mess deck.

#

Daniel bolted upright in his bunk, a scream strangled in his throat.

“Baby,” Catherine cried as she rushed over to him. She had already dressed herself again in the simple coveralls the colonists wore on the ship.

“I’m alright,” Daniel insisted.

“No, you’re not.” Catherine reached out and embraced Daniel, holding him tight to her. Daniel relaxed and let her take over. He tried to just lose himself in her warmth, her compassion, her love.

“No one sane could be alright after what happened to you,” Catherine said. “But I’m here for you, my love, I’ll always be here for you.”

Daniel felt the tears come again. With Catherine he didn’t have to hide them, with Catherine he could be what he really was -- weak.

#

It was New Years Eve, Christmas, and everyone’s birthday rolled into one grand party and celebration. The ship’s mess hall, packed with nearly every member of the colony, was in a mood that was rose quicker than a faster-than-light jump. The tables, except for a few which held drinks and other refreshments, were retracted into the deck, allowing the mess deck to be packed to capacity.

The walls simulated a deep oak paneling and at each end of the hall display screens had been programmed high on the walls. Someone had gone so far as to program elaborate frames around the displays. In each of the screens, the red star that would soon be their new sun dominated the scene. Below the screens, people drank, danced, and celebrated the coming vision of their new home.

“You know,” Todd screamed into Daniel’s ear. “There isn’t a person on board who hasn’t seen hours of Seclusion on video. Yet, look at all this!” Todd swung his hand encompassing the entire mess hall with the sweeping gesture.

“We’ve a lot of work to do. There are better ways to budget our time.”

“But you’re still here, aren’t you?” Daniel raised his glass and tipped it towards Todd.

“Yeah. I could say it was because my staff wasn’t getting any work done, but I’d be lying. I’ve gotta see the first live pictures as much as anyone else.”

“Nine minutes delayed, not live,” Daniel corrected.

“Speed of light notwithstanding, live pictures.”

Catherine worked her way through the standing crowd to her husband and Daniel. With one hand she towed her son Ryan along. Seeing his father, Ryan shot ahead of Catherine and leaped into Todd’s arms.

“How’s my little monster?” Todd swung Ryan in a high fast arc into the air, tossing him lightly and catching him again.

“The terror of the oh-three level.” Catherine slid up next to Todd, hugging him about the waist with one hand as he placed Ryan back down. “At least there is a limit to how dirty he can get on the ship.”

“Enjoy it while you can, love,” Todd tousled Ryan’s hair with one hand as he spoke with his wife. “Soon he’ll have dirt and red grass under his feet again.”

“Women and children aren’t going dirtside for at least six months, twelve if I can swing it,” Daniel offered.

“Daddy!” Ryan’s tone spoke of the vast injustice of the universe, but it wasn’t clear whether being called a child or being trapped on the ship for a year was the source of the injustice.

“Sorry, kiddo. Uncle Daniel’s the exploration expert, so we listen to him on this.”

“*Women* and children?” Catherine leaned out to peer at Daniel from around her husband -- her eyes narrowed in firm disapproval.

“In a breeding situation, Catherine, men are expendable, at least more expendable than women. I’ll argue against any woman not essential to exploration going down until we have at least an elementary grasp of the planet’s nature.” Daniel turned away from Catherine and looked up at the display at the far end of the hall. The counter was now displaying seconds.

“That’s not going to fly, Daniel.” Daniel ignored Catherine’s warning and pointed to the display.

“Fifty seconds.”

“Come here, monster.” Todd bent down and pulled Ryan up and onto his shoulders. Daniel noticed the eight-year-old’s weight was no longer inconsequential to Todd.

“Where is it, Daddy?”

“Just wait, here it comes.”

It seemed everyone in the room was counting down with the display as the final few seconds ticked away. Then a tiny gunmetal gray dot slid around the limb of the red sun. Starward of the gas giant was an almost invisible blue-red dot, the planet-moon Seclusion. Instantly a cursor appeared around the planet, magnified the display until Seclusion filled the screen.

The large moon was predominately blue, as sixty-five percent of the surface was water, shades of red and brown dominated the rest of the sphere. Silence ruled the hall for several heartbeats, and then the crowd broke out in boisterous cheers and yells.

#

"That's a lot of my reaction mass you took," Edward commented as he and Herb walked towards the Governing Council Chambers.

"The *Independence* isn't flying anywhere after we establish orbit," Herb replied. "Sorry, Eddie, it's true. That asteroid is rich, and I want to put where I need it."

The Conference room was simple and utilitarian. The rest of the Governing Council were already seated around the conference table that dominated the center of the room, while on the bulkheads, images of their plans for Seclusion were displayed.

"Margaret, you can't simply toss aside the colonization plan. We spent years designing it. It's not a whim." Exasperated, Daniel sat back in his chair. In front of him, projected from the top of the conference table, Seclusion itself rotated in the holo-display. Not the live feed, but a carefully mapped out Seclusion, blazoned with green accents of the proposed landing sites and exploration projections. Herb and Edward quietly took their seats, Edward next to his wife, Margaret.

"Too bad, Daniel." Margaret swept her blond hair away from her long oval face. "I cannot certify this ship as man-rated. We have to start landing people as soon as you can determine the site for the colony."

"Try to understand, Margaret..."

"No, you listen." Margaret punctuated her interrupting words with a finger pointed emphatically at Daniel. "We are damned lucky to have not ruptured the main hull in that jump, but that doesn't mean we are going to stay lucky. This hull has been seriously weakened. Edward, what's the max gee you'll push it at now?"

"I wouldn't take her above a tenth of a gee." Edward spoke softly.

"We might get lucky and not have any reason to strain the ship," Margaret continued. "But I am not going to bet the lives of this colony on that."

"No, you'll bet them on the data on Seclusion. Data from a single probe almost a two hundred years ago." Daniel looked for some way to make it clear to Margaret just how unpredictable an alien world could be, but nothing was coming to his mind. Damn it, she wasn't wrong -- that's what burned him. Either way the colony would have to take a big gamble.

"Daniel," Dr. Wells interjected, "it's more than just the hull. I can't keep the kids in a third of a gee for six months; it simply isn't possible."

"Getting eaten by some surprise is a bad end too, Doctor."

"That's a potential danger, Daniel, and you know it. What I am talking about is fact. These kids are trying to build bone every second of every day and if we keep them here for months on end in one-third of a

gee, you may as well ship them to Mars, 'cause that's the only place they will be fit for." Elizabeth Wells didn't shout, or even raise her voice. She stated her arguments in cold, level tones indicating there was no room to give.

"We've got six days before we inject ourselves in orbit about Seclusion," Todd said simply. "Daniel, I want you to work up a new exploration scheme. Cut it down as far as you can -- work with Margaret and Dr. Wells on it. Let's see if we can unload quickly, without being any more risky than we have to."

"Margaret," Todd turned to face the colonial engineer. "Give Daniel as much time as you can. No one here is stupid or careless. Our priorities are the same -- the good of colony."

"There is a priority one message for the council from the bridge," The computer announced suddenly.

"Pipe it in here." Todd waved over his controls, and Captain Domingo's narrow face and pinched nose replaced the graphic of their new home.

"It's inhabited!" Domingo's face was red with excitement, his brown eyes nearly bursting out of his head. "The probe missed it somehow, but there's no doubt about it. There is a city on Seclusion. Someone is living there."

"Back up a bit please, Captain," Daniel said. "What do you mean there's a city?"

"Watch this." Domingo turned away from the pickup, his face vanished as he turned; the planet Seclusion replaced him. Not the graphic with plotted landing sites and proposed colonies, but a video feed of the planet rotating. As the council watched the feed, Domingo continued to speak.

"Watch Horsehead Bay as it crosses over the terminator. Spectro clearly shows incandescent lighting."

It was exactly as he said it was. Daniel stood and leaned in towards the meeting table, watching intently as the large bay slid from day into night. There was nothing else it could be. Glowing brightly from the twilight of the planet were the lights of a city. Their home was someone else's.

Chapter 4

“That’s the best resolution we’ve got at the moment.” Captain Domingo stood back from the conference table and let the Governing Council look for themselves.

“Looks like there’s pretty solid cloud cover.” Daniel waved his hand at the image. “We can’t see much more than the lights are in a grid pattern.”

“That itself it pretty staggering.” Oliver stepped closer to the display, brushing back his red hair. “They’re symmetrically arranged, and that is an artifact of intelligence. There’s nothing in nature that lays out incandescent lights on a grid except an intelligent, tool-using, technically advanced species.”

“And it’s undoubtedly a human one.” Margaret collapsed back into her seat at the Council table. “Damn it.”

“We don’t know that. The conceit that we’re the only intelligent life forms in the universe is an absurd one. Life is abundant. Hell, even here around an ‘M’ class star, life has taken hold and flourished. Don’t try to tell me we’re it for evolution.”

“Oh, please,” Margaret’s voice was sharp and piercing. “Twenty seven hundred surveyed systems, thirteen hundred explored worlds, and no one’s found even a stone knife.” Margaret pointed accusingly at the cloud-shrouded, glowing grid. “That is a squatter colony!”

“Four hundred billion...” Oliver started to argue, but Todd’s raise hand silenced him.

“Bottom line,” Todd said softly, but with certainty. “We don’t know what or who laid out those lights, but we need to know.”

“They weren’t there one hundred eighty-nine years ago,” Daniel offered. “We have excellent scans, at all wavelengths, from the first probe. There was nothing like that.”

“We have to be prepared for a first contact situation. Damn, we didn’t plan for this and we haven’t even the start of a qualified contact team.” Oliver looked around the Chamber at the members of the Governing Council. “Do we even have a sociologist in the colony, I mean a topflight one?”

“Oliver, just give it a rest, okay?” Margaret snapped. She crossed her arms and glared over the bridge of her nose at the rest of the council. “Those squatters are going to put our charter in danger. If we don’t get this right, the first time, we’re going to lose Seclusion.”

“Don’t overreact, dear.” Edward reached for Margaret from his seat next to hers, but she jerked away from his touch.

“Have you people forgotten what a fight it was for us to keep this charter? Just how hard the voyeurs fought to take it away from us? This could be just the excuse they are looking for.”

“It’s already awarded to us,” Catherine said. “As long as we deliver on our obligations, they can’t touch us.”

“I’m not going to put my faith in League politicians.” Margaret turned to Todd. “You said we need to know, I agree. Let’s send a shuttle on a flyby.”

“That’s rather a waste.” Herb crossed his arms on his massive chest. “We’re going to be there in six days, no need to be wasting reaction mass or taking unnecessary chances.”

“With five thousand people as a target.”

“A target for what?” Herb stood upright and placed his arms akimbo. “None of the splinter movements took off with anything like heavy weapons. Little woman, you are a tad too paranoid.”

“No, she isn’t.”

All eyes turned to Daniel.

“Never be complacent in the face of the unknown. Personally, I think it’s a squatter that group we can likely deal with, who will be more like allies than enemies. But until we know something, I’m inclined to play it cautious.”

Todd surveyed the rest of the council, then to Edward.

“How long would it take, round trip, for a flyby?”

“The shuttles are undamaged, a few high-gee burns, call it under fifty hours. But that’s just a ballpark guess, I’d have to run the numbers for something exact,” Edward answered

“That would leave you some ninety hours to decided on what to do with the information.” Domingo said to the Council in general.

“Kill the round-trip requirement,” Herb suggested. “The flyby team can direct feed us their survey, if it’s all jim-dandy down there,

we'll meet them in orbit, if it isn't, they can scoot and meet us somewhere else."

"A good suggestion, Herb." Daniel looked at the other members of the council.

"We have three shuttles," Domingo added, "If we man them with a minimal crew, I think that's a suitable level of risk." Domingo turned to Todd. "But, I'm just driving this boat. You tell me what the council wants to have happen and I carry it out."

Todd was silent for several heartbeats.

"We can't make good decisions in the dark," Todd said. "Captain, have the shuttles readied for flight."

"Who's going?" Margaret asked.

"Edward and I will go," Daniel answered, "no need to risk anyone else." Daniel shook his head at Oliver before the agronomist had even spoken. "Not a chance Oliver. You are one of the least expendable members of the colony; you'll get your chance to see Seclusion up close."

"If it so hazardous, why send a manned craft at all? We could do it all with remotes." Catherine's voice didn't betray any of the undercurrent that Daniel heard so plainly. *If it's so dangerous, why do you have to go?*

"The same reason it's Edward and I. I have the experience at looking at these things first hands, and I trust Edward to fly us out if we have to scoot." Daniel turned to Edward. "Come-on, we're wasting time, let's get this survey in orbit."

#

By way of a large PEM display Margaret could see the shuttle that was just a couple of meters away from them. Fifty meters long, the shuttle was a dual-drive state of the art work of engineering. Smooth delta wings flowed back to the tailless fusion drive exhausts. The top of the shuttle was currently mated to the bulkhead of the shuttle bay where Margaret and the others floated, gathered here to send off Edward and Daniel.

"Not to worry," Edward said. "This should be fun, a little holiday."

"There's always reasons to worry," Margaret offered as she hugged Edward clumsily in the micro-gravity. The shuttle bay was necessarily along the centerline of the ship, meaning the compartments next to it were nearly weightless -- a condition Margaret adapted to well, but never liked.

"Take care," Todd ordered as Daniel and Edward floated to the airlock hatch.

“And keep your mind open for anything.” Oliver shouted as Daniel started through the short tunnel that led to the shuttle’s airlock.

Edward smiled, and followed Daniel, expertly moving in the micro-gravity. Farewells completed, the remaining members of the council headed for the lifts to take them back to the areas of the Independence that were under spin.

“Damn, I hate watching him fly off like that.” Margaret exited the lift and walked slowly down the passageway. Oliver Holt walked along side, his hands firmly in the pockets of his coveralls. Someone had, in a pique of mischief, set the halls here to simulate stonework, so the two proceeded along a corridor whose resemblance to a dungeon did nothing to improve Margaret’s mood.

“I hardly think they are in any danger.” Oliver pulled out a flimsy and absentmindedly worked at his biological survey notes and plans. “If we are lucky enough to have discovered the first intelligent alien life...”

“Just what kind of luck do you think that would be, Oliver?” Margaret threw a hand up in frustration. Pie in the sky sciences! It’s amazing the man isn’t a sociologist. “Firstly, if, and it won’t be, but if it were aliens, then the league would certainly recognize it as their world, and bye-bye to Seclusion. Second, the last thing we need is to start competing with another race...”

“Species.”

“Species, then, to start competing with them for the limited number of oxygen-nitrogen worlds to colonize. I don’t know what universe you live in, but that’s not the kind of luck I am looking for. And frankly, I don’t like trusting to luck.”

“Any advanced species will...”

“Be a danger to us. But forget the alien angle, because it isn’t aliens, it’s humans. The most vicious, bloodthirsty, violent, species we have encountered.” Margaret turned and followed Oliver up a flight of metal stairs to the next deck.

“Margaret,” Oliver said. “Even if it is a squatter colony, we’re not in any danger from them. They went out with hardly anything in the way of proper supplies, Von Newman machines for creating advanced technological tools, or even anything in the way of real brains. They were mostly personality-driven cults.”

This deck’s decor indicated more traditional thinking about starship hallways. Brushed metal walls, with lighting radiating softly from the overhead.

“Some of them were fully equipped, Oliver.” Margaret turned and stooped to look Oliver in his eyes, that were a tad lower than hers. “You go ask Herbert Adams what can be made with even the limited Von

Newman machine of two centuries ago. Ed and Daniel are going to be in serious danger, and soon we all will be.”

“You’re exaggerating. Even if someone had full colonial setup, two centuries ago, what was that worth?” Oliver asked.

“They could maintain their technological base for one,” Margaret answered. “It would be easy, with a little luck and the proper automation, they’d be just as advanced as when they left. The Von Newman’s couldn’t self-replicate without decent engineers and programers, but with them, they’re dangerous.”

Oliver walked around Margaret and continued the sixty some-odd meters to his lab. Margaret caught up just as Oliver opened the hatch to his lab.

“You’re right, I don’t know.”

Annie burst out of the lab, throwing herself bodily about her father’s legs.

“But nothing has killed more people than other people, Oliver; and remember, the Nazis were a personality cult.”

Margaret turned and walked away, leaving Oliver staring at his precious little girl.

#

“Polar or geostationary over Horsehead Bay?” Edward displayed the potential orbital insertions about Seclusion for Daniel’s inspection.

“Polar, it will give us a chance to launch our com-sats at the same time.” Daniel floated forward, maneuvering with only the lightest touch of his fingers. Explorer ships didn’t rotate for gravity; for him zero-gee skills were as natural as sleeping.

The cockpit of the shuttle would have been cramped had it been fully manned by the normal crew of four, but with just Daniel and Edward, it seemed comfortable. Only the pilot and copilot stations were active, with PEM generated displays and touch-controls glowing on the panels. The other stations, flight engineer and system specialists were smooth gray panels, undefined for any function or display.

“Polar it is.” Edward programmed the computer for the approach, then allowed the controls and interface to fade away, leaving the control surface also a flat neutral gray.

“Why’d you change your mind of how much gee the Independence could take?” Daniel grasped a handhold and oriented himself into Edward’s plane.

“Margaret had new data -- she is the colonial chief engineer after all.” Edward had suddenly found his own handhold terribly interesting.

“Listen, you want to change your mind, fine. I prefer to work with people who can admit that they are wrong. I just want you to have

changed it because you felt you were wrong, not because your wife talked you into it.”

“I can make up my own mind, Daniel.” Edward’s snippy tone was more than enough to convince Daniel that this conversation was pointless.

Edward kicked off the bulkhead and shot over to the hatch out of the cockpit. Daniel sighed and followed him out.

“If that came off wrong, I apologize,” Daniel said as they floated out into the cavernous passenger compartment. “Sometimes Margaret comes off a little strong and it rubs me the wrong way.”

The vast compartment was shrouded in darkness, with only a tiny strip of PEM set to cast any illumination at all. Not yet configured for either cargo or passenger duties, the shuttle’s main compartment was an empty hollow cylinder.

“She is stubborn, but that doesn’t make her wrong either,” Edward tossed over his shoulder as he pulled a sleeping bag from the storage locker. A bit of a scowl still on his face. “I know everyone thinks she has me wrapped around her thumb, but that’s not the case, really.”

“That’s not what I think,” Daniel lied.

“Yes, it is. But it’s doesn’t matter, because the ship is too damaged, she knows that and you know that.” Edward attached one end of the bag to the bulkhead then, with a dexterity born of many years in space, slipped quickly into the fabric.

“I know, I know, but give me my due as well. A surveyed planet is full of surprises. We can’t go rushing into things.” Daniel pulled out his own sleeping bag and affixed it to the bulkhead. In seconds he cocooned like Edward, floating with his arms in front of him, ready for sleep.

Edward commanded the lights down to dim, and closed his eyes. Daniel gazed around the compartment, soon to be filled with hundreds of colonists and their equipment heading for Seclusion. Too soon, of that he was certain.

#

The Governing Council sat around the conference table again, bare walls faced the Council; the displays of the future colonial expansion and construction removed to make room for the images transmitted back by Edward and Daniel. The still images, that is. The video and live feeds would, of course, be fed through the holographic display projecting from the conference table.

“Network established.” Catherine turned from her PEM-generated console and looked back at Todd. Margaret settled herself into a seat and closed her eyes, preferring to listen to the commentary that Daniel

and Edward would transmit. There would be time for a detailed study of the video later. With the walls set to a smooth metal finish, the sound bounced harshly, but that fit her mood perfectly. No one else grasped just how precarious their charter really was.

"The rest of Seclusion is wild," She heard Daniel say. "There is just the one colony on Horsehead bay, and what looks like a small outpost some eighty kilometers to the northwest."

"I think that's a mine," Edward offered. "It has a road leading between it and the main colony."

"Not much of a road." Daniel again. "Unimproved is too kind of a judgment, but I think Edward is right, **it** looks like a mining setup, possibly an automated one."

"It's difficult to determine the population of the squatters. There are buildings of large size that look like they could be communal living spaces, and many small ones that could be homes. The computer has put the rough estimate between eight thousand and no more than fourteen."

"The fields are green. Are they using terran plants?" Dr Wells asked.

"That's what it looked like," Daniel's voice answered. "The imaging can't give us enough detail to identify the plants, but I can't see how else you get green on this planet."

"That's a bit of good news," Oliver said, "We can use our seed stock with a minimal amount of reengineering."

"What's that structure around the colony?" Todd's asked.

"It's a wall; we make it to be two and half meters high and completely surrounding the colony on the landward side." Edward was speaking again. "It's pretty impressive."

"I'd say," agreed Herb. "That's a lot of wall when a fence does just as well."

"What about the starship that got them here?" Catherine asked.

"Disassembled," Daniel replied. "Converted into some of their buildings."

"How about their shuttles?" Captain Domingo asked, "Landing fields, is there anything like that?"

"Not that we can see," Edward answered. Margaret could tell that Edward was more worried about the lack of shuttles or space facilities than he was admitting with his words.

"Any sign of weapons or orbital missiles?" Margaret asked without bothering to open her eyes.

"Nothing like that," Edward answered quickly.

“Then I suggest we take the Independence into orbit about Seclusion.” Margaret opened her eyes, standing up from her chair. “The hull is still stressed, and this doesn’t change the need to get our people down as quickly as possible.”

“I advise against it,” Daniel predictably countered. “We don’t know enough to risk bringing the ship into a close orbit. Let’s park her around the gas giant, and use shuttles for our close approach until we know who is here ahead of us.”

“Too risky,” Dr. Wells spoke up. “We have to get within Seclusion’s magnetosphere for protection from solar flares; we can’t do that with the gas giant. The radiation belts there are lethal.”

“Come on, Elizabeth, this star is pretty quiet, the odds of a flare while we check things out are pretty slim.” Daniel replied.

“Yes, they are slim, Daniel, but not slim enough. We haven’t a good baseline for predicting flares here. Until we do, I’m going to keep suggesting we take every radiation precaution we can.”

“Daniel,” Margaret opened her eyes at the sound of footsteps. Todd stepped up to the holo-display, now dominated with Daniel’s rich brown face. “This isn’t an exploration vessel. I can’t run that risk with the whole colony.” Todd looked around the compartment. “Anyone feel we should orbit the gas giant?” No one indicated that preference.

“Daniel, Edward, we’ll dock in orbit there. Keep monitoring the colony and alert us to anything you discover.”

The rest of the council left to pursue their own investigations and questions about the squatter colony, leaving Margaret alone in the room. Around her, on the walls, displays projected the images captured by Edward and Daniel’s reconnaissance.

Massive fortifications, dense communal living, and more than twice as many as were on the Independence: none of this looked good at all.

Chapter 5

Jacob Gibson sat trying not to fidget in his best Sunday clothes. The work clothes he wore during the week suited him better than these. Even his scout uniform was more comfortable.

A noise from behind him caused Jacob to turn around. Donny tried to freeze in his seat, but Jacob shot him a look that Jacob hoped would instruct Donny in proper behavior in the Lord's house.

Turning back to face the pulpit, Jacob sighed and tried again to set an example for the young boys of his dorm. It wasn't just about behaving, it was about showing respect for your elders, and most of all showing respect for Christ and God.

The low murmur of eleven thousand people died away as Chief Alderman Knight took to his pulpit.

Jacob bowed his head as Alderman Knight led the Lord's Colony of Havilah in the opening prayer of Sunday Services. The congregation whispered along with Alderman Knight, reciting a prayer that spoke three times a week, and twice on Sunday. The vast power of the prayer, and the humility of the congregation, calmed Jacob. He was always most at peace here in church. If only he could be here with comfortable clothes.

Today Alderman's Knight sermon was about history, and about the special role God reserved for the faithful and the meek. It was a lesson that Jacob had heard before, but he paid close attention. Back on Earth people had stopped listening to the Lord's voice, and in that silence Satan had found easy converts.

"Our fathers were driven from their home," Alderman Knight said. "Forced to abandon the land that God had promised to his children, our

fathers risked the depths and coldness of space rather than renounce the Lord. God heard their prayers, he saw their devotion, and he brought them here.”

Jacob closed his eyes and tried to imagine what it had been like to flee Earth, be lost among the stars, and then to find this moon, a place where men could breathe and live. Truly, God had sent a miracle to save his people.

“Let us pray for the Christians of Earth,” Alderman Knight intoned. “Hiding in secret as the early Christians hid from the Romans, persecuted and hunted, their very faith stripped from them by the devil’s agents.”

Jacob bowed his head as Knight led them in prayer again. Jacob counted his blessings. He had been born on Havilah, where men sang to God’s glory, instead of having the love of that glory stripped away by doctors who knew nothing of the soul.

The services finished with joyous signing of hymns, after which the people of Havilah began processing out the cavernous church, back to their homes.

Jacob stood by the door as the boys of his dorm exited, and carefully counted each head. They were good boys, but boys just the same, and inclined to run off on a Sunday afternoon rather than attend to their chores.

“We missing anyone?” Brian asked as he stood next to Jacob.

“No. Let’s head home. Take the rear.”

Brian fell back to the rear of the group as Jacob took the lead.

Jacob led them in singing as they walked back to the dorm. While not a march it was clear Jacob had control of his scouts.

The dusty soil of Havilah kicked up in finely powdered clouds as they walked. The streets here in the center of town were wide affairs, not the narrow twisting paths of the old city that the founders had laid down. The buildings on either side were colorful, the lower sections green from the concrete, and the walls and roofs red from the natural wood.

“Jacob,” Mallory asked. “Can I go camping tonight?”

All the boys of the dorm wanted to go on tonight’s camping trip. Even a camping trip inside the wall was a treat. Still, Jacob didn’t want to take more than a dozen boys camping. Havilah wasn’t Eden. He hadn’t lost a scout, and he wasn’t about to start.

“I’ll post the list after inspection,” Jacob said. “If Alderman Knight isn’t happy with our dorm, there won’t be a trip for anyone.”

“We’ll ace that,” Mallory said. “We’ve never let Alderman Knight down.”

“No, you haven’t,” Jacob agreed proudly.

The boys exploded across the vast dorm room when they entered, while Jacob stepped into his private room and changed out of his dress clothes.

When Jacob returned from his room, he saw that most of the boys had already changed clothes and had started cleaning the dorm, preparing for the weekly inspection. Hurrying a couple stragglers along, Jacob supervised the cleaning, while not above getting on his knees to make the dorm spotless.

“You know,” Brian said as they scrubbed at the corners where dirt liked to build up. “Russell never scrubbed as much as you do.”

“Well, I’m not Russell.” Jacob replied. Jacob had never agreed with Russell’s way of running the dorm or its scout troop. It had been a happy day when Russell married Ellen and moved into the apartments with the other adults.

Ninety minutes later the dorm gleamed with their efforts.

“Shower and clean up!” Jacob ordered. “I don’t want a bunch of smelly boys for Alderman Knight.”

The boys filed to the communal showers with the usual enthusiasm showed by young boys for bathing -- little to none. Jacob retreated to his room, Brian following.

“I got the makeup,” Brian said as he sat in a corner of Jacob bed.

“Great,” Jacob kicked his feet up as he sat. “That should make for a great camping trip.”

“Where are we taking them?”

“Out by the south fields. I think we’ll be okay just a couple of hundred yards from the wall.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Brian looked around the small room as he spoke. “Any thoughts about next year?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come on, you’ll be seventeen. Time to get married and move out of the kiddy hall.”

“I don’t have to get married at seventeen,” Jacob answered. “Billy didn’t get married until he was twenty.”

“Billy also smelled like something a death-angel wouldn’t touch.”

“Be charitable,” Jacob advised. “It’s the Christian thing to be.”

“I’m charitable that I didn’t live in his dorm.” Brian stood and headed for the door. “I better get a shower myself or they’ll start calling me stinky-Brian.”

Jacob climbed into his private shower -- another luxury of being the dorm leader -- and began scrubbing himself down. He had just

stepped out of the shower and had begun drying his short dirty-blond hair when he heard a commotion erupting from the dorm.

Throwing a towel modestly around his waist, Jacob hurried into the main room.

“George, Christian!” Jacob shouted at the two fighting boys, “Stop that at once!”

The two boys attempted simultaneously to stop fighting, land the final blow on each other, and look innocent. They failed at both.

“He started...” George started to complain.

“I don’t care,” Jacob snapped. “There is never an excuse for hitting someone. What would Alderman Knight say if he saw you right now? Just how hurt do you think he would be that you haven't listened to a word of his sermon?”

“That’s not true!” Christian protested.

“It is true, at least by your actions.” Jacob placed his arms akimbo and looked over the dorm. “Our fathers chose exile rather than be corrupted by the sin on Earth. Are you going to throw away their sacrifice?”

“But Jacob...” George pleaded.

“Boys,” Jacob moved to the center of the room, tracking wet footprints. “There is no other way to live God’s commandments than to do it. He didn’t say ‘Love your fellow man, except for George or Christian’.”

Jacob turned his gaze on George and Christian.

“I guess I’m doing a pretty poor job teaching you how to love each other. Fighting like that -- do you want Alderman Knight to see you?”

“No, sir.” The two boys echoed.

“And the rest of you,” Jacob turned to the rest of the dorm. Eighty-seven pairs of eyes tried to find something interesting on the floors or walls.

“The rest of you should have been helping George and Christian be brothers,” Jacob continued “Instead of watching like the Romans at Jesus’ crucifixion.”

Jacob held his breath as the boys shuffled nervously in the dorm.

“Maybe I should just cancel this camping trip.”

The boys moved forward as one, a confusing medley of protesting voices.

“If you can’t act like real Christians, maybe we need to start over.” Jacob walked away from the boys, back towards his room.

He stopped at his door and turned back to the boys, the faces crestfallen with his displeasure at them.

“George, Christian, do you have something say?” Jacob asked.

"I'm sorry." The two boys said.

"That's better," Jacob turned back fully to face the boys. "I won't skip the camping trip, but I expect better in the future."

A little while later, Alderman Knight moved along the rows of beds, his keen eye careful for dirt and grime.

"It's looking very nice," Knight said.

"Thank you, sir." Jacob tried to keep his voice carefully neutral. Pride was a sin, and most of all for Alderman Knight, Jacob didn't want to appear sinful.

Alderman Knight stopped at the end of the dorm, a golden copy of the Ten Commandments posted for all to see.

"The Devil-Rats are a good troop," Knight said. "Are they ready for their little camping trip?"

"I think so, sir."

"Good," Knight moved to the door out. "The other Aldermans should be so lucky as to have such boys in their dorms." A wide smile grew on Knight's face and Jacob felt himself swell with pride - despite his best efforts.

"Can I speak to you alone, sir?" Jacob asked.

"Of course, Jacob."

Alderman Knight followed Jacob into Jacob's private room.

"What's bothering you, son?" Knight asked.

"How do you know when something is right?" Jacob asked.

"If you're quiet enough, God will let you know."

Jacob sat down on his bed and looked up at Alderman Knight. Knight had thinning hair, a quick smile, and a kind face. It was the type of face Jacob imagined his father might have had.

"What's got you so worried?" Knight leaned against the door jam and studied Jacob.

"How do you know if a girl is the right one to be your wife?"

Knight shook with friendly laughter.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "It's not funny to you, and it isn't to me either, it's just so good to hear this sort of problem for a change."

"I think I want to marry Cindi..." Jacob started.

"But?" Knight asked.

"What if I'm wrong? What if I turn out like Michael did?" Jacob remembered standing before the aldermen as they exiled Michael for adultery. As lead watchman, it had fallen on Jacob to escort Michael to the forest and cast him out of Havilah. What Jacob couldn't understand is why Rianna had cried when her adulterous husband had been cast out.

"I don't think that's going to happen," Knight said, jerking Jacob's attention back to the here and now. "But pray to God, listen close, and he'll let you know in your heart if Cindi is the one."

"If I know it," Jacob stammered. "Will you speak to her father for me?"

"I'll be proud to, son." Knight moved forward and laid a hand on Jacob's shoulder. "It was shame that God called your parents home so soon, but I'm glad he let me do what little I could for you."

"You've done great by me, sir."

"I've done my best," Knight replied. "That's all the Lord expects of any of us."

Jacob escorts Chief Alderman Knight out of the dorm, then returned to Brian standing by Jacob's door.

"Finish getting the Devil-Rats ready," Jacob told Brian. "I've got a visit to make before we march."

"Take your time," Brian offered as Jacob stepped out of the dorm.

The red sun was just past the zenith, leaving plenty of time for obligations before the troop's march to the south fields.

Jacob walked east, the gentle slope of the ground easing his way towards the bay. A salty breeze blew up from the sea. It would be fishing season again soon, a chance to go out to sea and experience Havilah without a ten-foot wall around you. Jacob had been giving a lot of time lately to what he wanted to do as a man. Working a fishing boat tempted him. One day he might even be running a boat of his own. Still, the sea was dangerous and he didn't know how Cindi would take to being left behind each season.

Before Jacob reached the fisheries and the docks he turned south and followed a wide boulevard, the widest street in all of Havilah, as it climbed up a modest sized hill that overlooked the bay and the city.

The fake marble of the Mausoleum glistened in the mid-morning light, glowing like a white apparition on the hill. Multiple spire rose from the roof, each tipped with a golden cross in the Lord's glory, by whose power and grace those inside would live again.

Jacob stepped carefully as he entered the Mausoleum. Others were here for their loved ones and he gave the the same solitude that he was looking for.

With years of practice, Jacob stepped to the rows near the back of the building where his parents' ashes were kept safe. On the cold hard benches provided for the mourners, he sat in silence.

He used to speak to mom and dad, but for the last year he had remained silent. Though not sure if they heard him, Jacob didn't doubt that they lived in joy and love with Christ the Lord. He used to talk to

them all the time, but now it getting time for him to be finding his own life. In his heart, Jacob feared he was losing respect for his mother and father, so he stayed longer his visit becoming more diligent.

After an hour of silent tribute, Jacob stood and saw Cindi standing at the head of the row, silently watching him.

“Hi,” Jacob whispered as they walked back to the entrance.

“You weren’t going to go camping without saying good-bye, were you?” Cindi asked, her voice carried no hint of serious reproach or condemnation.

“Of course not,” Jacob replied. “Anyway it’s only three days.”

“Three days or three hundred, it feels the same.”

Jacob stared at Cindi as they stepped out in the sunlight. Her blonde hair caught the rays of light and shone as if the light was inside it, instead of falling on her. Her smile, even this polite and restrained one, lit her face almost as much as the red sun in the sky. Her pale skin and bright blue eyes finished what seemed to Jacob to be a picture of perfection.

“For me, too,” Jacob agreed. Was she the one? It would so unfair to ask her to marry him, if he wasn’t right for her.

“What are you thinking?” She asked as they walked down the hill towards Havilah.

“Serious grown-up thoughts,” Jacob replied.

“Fine, don’t tell me,” Cindi took his hand in hers and led him faster down the hill. Just as they reached the main city, Cindi pulled Jacob aside and hid the two of them in a narrow alley between the fish cannery and its power plant.

“Cindi!” Jacob protested as they moved out of public view.

“It’s okay,” Cindi said. “We won’t be here long, and you would never take advantage.”

Cindi pulled herself close to Jacob, leaned her face up and kissed him quickly, but powerfully.

“I love you,” She whispered.

“I love you too,” He said as he pulled them back onto the public street. “But if we’re seen without a chaperon, people will talk.”

“It was enough,” she replied. “Now I can let you go for three days.”

Waving good-bye, Cindi hurried back towards her dorm, leaving Jacob to return to his.

#

All the lights were out save one campfire, and around this single fire Troop 005, The Devil-rats, gathered for the ancient tradition of scary stories by moon and firelight. Since Havilah was a moon, the ghastly gray light that dimly illuminated beyond the campfire was from

the gas giant Goliath. It hung low in the sky, just above the horizon, an enormous figure in the star filled heavens.

As Jacob told his terrifying story of life on Earth, the young scouts listened with rapt awe. These twenty scouts weren't all The Devil-rats; the youngest hadn't learned enough to be safe away from the barracks, and the elders all had chores, so Jacob, Brian, and Phil rode herd on these scouts.

Of course, the boys knew that Jacob had never lived on Earth. The original settlers died long ago, but devotion kept the history of Earth, and its corruption, alive.

"The nigger was creeping up on the house now." Jacob's eyes were yellow and red with reflected firelight as he leaned in towards the circle of scouts. "His skin was as black as the night, and even if there had been anyone to see, all they would have seen was his eyes, his teeth as he grinned with lust, and maybe, just maybe, a glint off the steel blade in his hand."

A Moses bush exploded in the fire, sending a shower of flaming oil, red and orange, shooting high above the flames, startling the attentive audience.

"The white woman had no idea that the nigger was outside her window watching, as he had been for every night of the last two weeks. Each night his lust grew greater, and tonight he was going to sate it."

Jacob lowered his voice, continuing just above a conspiratorial whisper. The young scouts leaned in closer, now they were nearly touching head to head as Jacob told his tale.

"She stripped off her clothes, revealing bit by bit her gleaming, radiant white skin. He started slaving as she kneeled next to her bed and prayed to God, as a good Christian. Deep inside him, he felt the powerful call of his sins, but he fought them for a little while longer. He knew that once the lights were out, she would be his."

Jacob smiled an evil smile as he saw several scouts were gripping the fabric of their khaki uniforms so tightly their hands were even more white than normal. Jacob fought back laughter and continued with the spook-story.

"Fantasizing about her skin, her flesh, and her virginity, the nigger waited until she switched out her light, making the room as black as his skin, as his heart."

"He crept, as quiet as a beast, to the back door. The knife blade in his hand quivered as he dreamt of cutting her. Watching her bleed red on her white, white skin."

Another bulb in the campfire burst, as sharp, and as loud as a rifle shot in the night. Mallory rose a good foot, then hurriedly took

back his seat, his face as red as the flame. Once the giggling and teasing at Mallory's expense subsided, Jacob continued.

"The door was unlocked, and the nigger thanked Satan for this -- he knew who his master was. Moving through the house, he spied the things he would steal after he had his way with the woman and had killed her. This was going to be the best time ever, he thought. Better than the time he caught that twelve-year old."

"And then he was at her bed," Jacob's voice drifted away as he let his young charges imagine the horror he was about to describe.

Suddenly, screaming at the top of his lungs, the nigger was there. He skin was as black as the night, and it reflected, like thick oil, in the firelight. He raised his knife in one hand, a blade as long as a sword, and his eyes were the very personification of sin and Satan.

The scouts scattered, tripping over each other as they fled the campfire in terror.

Jacob's laughter split the night, louder than Brian's terrifying yell as the dreaded nigger. Jacob stood, shaking with laughter, and called out to the campers.

"It's just Brian!" Laughter weakened his voice, but Jacob could tell the scouts had heard him. Some of the older ones had already stopped, only a few steps away from the campfire. Nervously looking away, they were embarrassed at being as startled as the young ones.

"Come on back," Jacob managed between fits of dying laughter.

It wasn't long before all the scouts were back at the camp, sitting sheepishly by the fire.

"Are niggers really that black?" Randy pointed towards Brian's oiled skin.

"Some are, but they come in all sorts of shades, the only thing that's the same is the sin on their soul." Brian explained.

"Aren't we all sinners?" Ruben asked. "Christ died for our sins, right?"

"That's right," Jacob answered. "But colored people are different, they are descendants of Cain, and they bear his mark as God commanded. Cain's sins are their sins."

Jacob stood and walked over to Brian.

"Let's get this stuff off you." Jacob dragged a finger along Brian's face, clearing a streak as he did so. "Phil, watch the camp and get them working on their badges. Brian and I are heading down to the river."

Down at the river's edge, Jacob kept watch as Brian washed off his crude makeup. Above them Goliath loomed large and gray, casting a faint light over the landscape. Jacob stole a few glances to the gas giant, but never for very long. He scanned the fields north of the river,

and the wall, to the south just twenty yards away. While they were inside the colony's wall, beasts still crossed over from time to time. In truth, nowhere was really safe, even in pairs it was dangerous to travel far in the dark.

"Christ! This water is freezing," Brian complained as he splashed in the river.

"Don't blaspheme." Jacob sneaked a quick peek towards the camp. It was unlikely any of the youngsters had heard the remark.

"Sorry, Jacob." Brian continued washing off the blackface makeup. "Did you see their faces? That was the most fun I've had in an age."

"A rite of passage, getting the bee-geezes scared out of you on a camping trip." Jacob sat on a small boulder and continued to scan the dim landscape. "But they need to learn to be scared. This isn't Eden, and there are more here than serpents."

"You're preaching to the choir, brother." Brian slogged his way up the bank and reclaimed his clothes. Shivering, he dressed quickly.

"What are you thinking about?" Brian sat next to Jacob on the boulder.

"Cindi."

"Nothing new there, you've got a one-track mind." In the gray light reflected from Goliath, Brian looked more dead than alive.

"It's not what you think, knucklehead."

"Sure, sure, whatever you say fearless leader." Brian stretched out on the boulder, looking nearly boneless as he conformed to its shape. "You shouldn't waste any more time, my friend. Marry her, get your own place and move out of the barracks. You're too old to be living with us boys."

Movement from the camp caught Jacob's eye. He moved quickly towards the camp, Brian followed close behind.

They had covered less than half the distance when they came across Mallory running, alone, towards them.

"What are you doing out here alone?" Jacob bellowed.

"There's..." Mallory was out of breath, and pointed to the sky as he tried to breathe. "There's something in the sky." He finally managed.

"What do you mean, something in the sky?" Brian asked.

"Not a shooting star, but we don't know what it is." Mallory stood, his breathing a little more under control. "Phil sent me straight away for you."

"By yourself?" Jacob silently promised that he wouldn't skin Phil alive, but Phil didn't need to know about that promise.

“No one wanted to leave the scope. It’s moving fast and will be below the horizon soon.”

“I don’t care. No one goes out after dark by themselves, ever!” Jacob let his anger subside and looked at Mallory. “Go, lead the way back. But don’t run blindly. Choose in haste, repent in leisure.”

Together the three hurried back to the campsite. The scouts were all gathered around the telescope. Peering over each other’s shoulders, they tried to look at the display screen together.

“Look at that.” Phil pointed to a bright star almost directly above them.

No, it wasn’t a star, it moved far too slowly for a shooting star, that was certain. It was something in orbit. A spacecraft.

“We can’t get the ‘scope to track on it. It’s moving pretty fast,” Phil said.

“It’s in a low polar orbit,” Brian offered. Brian was one of Havilah’s reserve pilots. Of course, he had only flown in simulation. Their one shuttle was far too precious to risk in live pilot training. The Redemption would be required for the Day of Return.

“A ship?” One of the boys squeaked excitedly. “Are we going home to Earth?”

“I don’t know.” Jacob shook his head and looked around the scout camp. The time for camp-outs was over.

“Pack’em up, scouts,” Jacob ordered. “We’re heading back.”

Chapter Six

An electric charge filled the air of Havilah. News of the troop's discovery had spread faster than devil-rats in the grainery. Even in daylight, people stopped in the dusty streets and looked to the sky, as if they could spot the orbiting spaceship with their naked eyes.

"They should open the church," Brian suggested as he and Jacob walked toward one of Havilah's large dining halls.

"That's God's house," Jacob replied. "Nothing goes on in there except his worship, you know that."

"Come on," Brian said. "This is big! Everyone should be watching it together instead of treating it like another video."

"It's disrespectful, and you can't be making exceptions."

Jacob and Brian climbed the short red wooden steps into their dining hall.

The main hall was large enough to feed more than a thousand people, though in practice the people of Havilah had adopted to eating in shifts, so it was a rare event that saw more than two or three of the thirteen halls filled. Today was a rare event.

Boys and girls rushed back and forth, ignoring the custom of girls to the left and boys to the right. A festive atmosphere dominated the mood of the hall. On the large video screen at the north end of the hall a loop of the spacecraft played continuously.

Long rows of tables stretched across the hall, but lunch today was simple sandwiches and fruit juices. Even the kitchen staff stood gawking at the spaceship on the screen. Jacob couldn't remember anything having this sort of impact on Havilah before. He could hear some of the people wondering aloud if this was The Day of Return.

“Jacob!” Cindi rushed and stood next to Jacob and Brian. Jacob sensed that she just barely restrained herself from an unacceptable public display of affection.

“Isn’t this wonderful?” she asked. “Everyone is excited by your discovery!”

“Not mine,” Jacob answered. “I was watching Brian wash off in the river when it was spotted.”

“It was the Devil-Rats, your troop, your discovery.” Cindi announced simply.

“Phil was the one who spotted it,” Jacob answered.

Cindi smiled and said nothing.

“Tell her, Brian,” Jacob asked.

“No way,” Brian stepped away from the couple. “I’m not getting in the middle of it. I’m getting a sandwich.” With a smirk on his face, Brian slipped away to a nearby table.

“Still,” Jacob offered. “Everyone is pretty excited. It’s like the biggest Christmas ever.”

“Of course it is!” Cindi agreed. “Maybe the Rapture is near and we are going to go home.”

“Maybe,” Jacob said. “Or it could be more Christians who have escaped.” Jacob looked up at the fuzzy image on the video screen. Havilah’s telescopes were better suited to spotting asteroids rather than the fine details of orbiting craft, yet still the general shape and wings of the shuttle were clearly visible.

“It does look a lot like The Redemption,” he offered.

“It’s a good thing,” Cindi said firmly. “Nothing that comes from you can be bad.”

Cindi slipped her hand in Jacob's, and amid the hustle and noise of the dining hall they enjoyed the simple contact with each other.

“Jacob!” Patrick’s voice cut through the noise of the hall, shattering Jacob’s blissful mood.

“What?” Jacob asked, covertly releasing Cindi’s hand.

“Alderman Brock is looking for you,” Patrick said.

“I have to go,” Jacob said to Cindi. “Is there trouble?” Jacob asked of Patrick.

“Nothing I’ve heard of,” Patrick answered as they made their way out of the dining hall.

Well, that was something. It meant it wasn’t a problem that required turning out the Watchmen. In the three years that Jacob had served as the head Watchman, the only thing that ever called the Watchmen together were beast hunts. Havilah’s part-time police force was joyously underworked.

“Okay,” Jacob said as they walked to Alderman’s Hall. “Anyone getting out of hand? Too excited about the spaceship?”

“Nothing so far,” Patrick said.

“Good,” Jacob replied. The two young men walked in silence for two more streets.

Patrick said, “I’m heading to grab some grub. I’ll be at my dining hall if you need me.”

Jacob waved goodbye as he moved up the steps of Alderman’s Hall.

Alderman’s Hall had been the founder’s first church, large enough to hold all fifteen hundred of Havilah’s original fathers. Jacob had never known it as a church; for him it had always been the place from which the Aldermen led Havilah.

Once inside the wide double doors, Jacob walked briskly down past the simple benches of the gallery, past the Aldermen’s dais, to the offices in the back. He rapped twice on Alderman Brock’s door.

“Come in,” Alderman Brock shouted through the closed door.

“Hello, Jacob,” Brock said brightly as Jacob shut the door behind himself.

“Good morning, Alderman Brock.” Jacob moved to a straight-backed chair in front of Alderman Brock’s desk and seated himself.

“Quite a stir your troop turned up,” Alderman Brock offered.

“Yes, sir,” Jacob agreed. “I hear some people are thinking it might even be The Day of Return.”

“Well, you know better than to jump to conclusions.” Brock leaned back in his chair. “It’s one reason why you’re such a good Watchman.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“It’s the Watchmen I want to talk to you about,” Brock leaned forward again, resting his arms on the desk. Jacob noticed that a little more gray had appeared in Alderman Brock’s hair. Brock was the youngest of the Aldermen, but sometimes it looked as if he were aging faster than Chief Alderman Knight.

“Is there trouble, sir?” Jacob asked.

“No, nothing out of the ordinary,” Brock answered. “But Russell’s gotten Aldermen Mercer to sponsor his proposal.”

Russell liked being a Watchman too much -- of that Jacob was certain. Now one of the Aldermen had agreed that Watchmen should be a full-time job instead of something men did as a service.

“I don’t think it is a good idea, sir.”

"I agree," Alderman Brock stood and paced a bit behind his desk. "A Watchman should be a person of the community, not someone outside it."

"I don't think the Alderman would adopt it, sir. You're the head of the Watchmen. If you say it's a bad idea, that'll be the end of it."

"It's not always that easy, but in this case you might be right." Brock stopped pacing and sat on the edge of his desk, close to Jacob. "If I call you before the Aldermen, to speak about this, can I count on you?"

"Of course, sir." Jacob wondered how Alderman Brock could even doubt it. "I know the other Watchmen feel the same way, too."

"Good," Brock got up from the desk and moved back to his chair. "Let's get the rest of this work done."

Jacob and Alderman Brock spent the rest of the afternoon working on the routine matters of the Watchmen. As the alderman in charge of law and order in Havilah, all matters of public disturbance and possible violations of the Lord's Commandments were brought to Brock's attention by the Watchmen.

"Good work," Brock said as he put the last of the issues aside. "I think Havilah has never had better Watchmen."

"Careful, sir. Alderman Knight says we must always be careful of pride."

"Undue pride is a sin, Jacob. But it's also a lie to not deny what you've done well." Brock answered. "But enough of that, I have something I want to show you."

Brock rose from his desk and pulled a large map from his private cabinet. Spreading the map on the now empty desk, he stood back to let Jacob get a good look at it.

Jacob recognized the outline of Havilah's second continent. Then, a moment later he realized that another colony was detailed there.

"An expansion?" he asked.

"We can't keep knocking down the walls to make Havilah bigger," Brock replied. "I think it's time we founded another city. I also think you should be on that expedition."

"Wow," Jacob managed.

"I know you've been trying to decide what to do as a man." Brock pointed to the proposal on the desk. "I think you need something a little different."

Jacob hesitated. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything right now. The Aldermen haven't approved even the exploration plan, yet -- but they will." Brock rolled the map back into a tube. "But I wanted you to be thinking about it. It's

your call, Jacob.” Brock replaced the proposal in the cabinet. “Run along. We’ll talk more about this later.”

After Jacob left, Kyle Brock sat and thought. Everyone was certain that the spaceship orbiting above them held more Christians, brothers led by the Lord to Havilah. Kyle wasn’t so certain.

The founders had taken great care to hide their efforts until the day of launch. Kyle didn’t think they would have left behind clues to their destination. The odds of a friendly group of Christians just happening to find Havilah were slim to zero, and “slim” was calling in sick. If there were a kind and loving God, he might have led brothers to Havilah, but the universe didn’t work that way. The universe was a cold uncaring place and only those who were prepared to deal with those hard facts survived.

The harbor drew Kyle’s attention. The ship overhead looked a lot like their own shuttle, so maybe it could only land on water as well. That meant whoever it was up there could only land in the bay, or out to sea. There wasn’t any point in landing out to sea unless you hoped to come in quietly. Damn it! If Havilah had its own satellite in orbit they would know a lot more about whoever it was. It would help much with the weather as well.

It had seemed like the storm came out of no where, but that wasn’t the case. Hell, a crude satellite a few hundred years old would have warned them that a big blow was coming. Instead the fishing fleet had to fend off waves forty feet high without any warning.

Kyle shook his head, as though he could shake the memory out of his brain. He couldn’t afford to waste time, and thinking about that was nothing but a waste. Still, his mind’s eye saw a wall of blue-green water charging towards the ship.

“Sir?” Jonathan asked from the door.

“Yes, Jonathan,” Kyle replied, focusing on the page, on the office, on anything but the sea.

“The Aldermen are meeting now, sir.” Jonathan slipped backwards out of Kyle’s office.

Grabbing a few notes from his desk, Kyle hurried to the dais.

“Forgive me, brothers,” Kyle offered formally as he took his seat on the dais. “It has been a busy day.”

“A momentous day,” Chief Alderman Knight suggested. “At the very least new brothers have come to join us, and perhaps our long exile is at an end.”

“May I suggest that they might not be our brothers.” Kyle waited for Knight to roll his eyes and sigh. Knight was a good preacher, but he

rarely saw the real flaws in people. A few months of running the Watchmen would do the man wonders.

“Cynicism is not wisdom,” Knight replied.

“And caution is not cynicism,” Kyle said. “I think it’s possible that the people above us mean us nothing good.”

Kyle leaned out so the rest of the Aldermen could see him more clearly.

“There are a few things we should specifically look for that might give us an indication of their intentions.” Kyle’s voice echoed off the hardwood walls of the nearly empty hall as he spoke. “They know we are here. Havilah stands out like a Christmas tree at night, so they already know when and where we can observe their craft. If they break for landing in view, then maybe they have nothing to hide, but if they break orbit while over the horizon, then I think they are trying to hide from us.”

“There could be other reasons,” Knight countered.

“Yes, but let’s not bet our freedom on them,” Kyle replied. “Also, we should consider arming everyone, maybe even with hunting rifles.”

A commotion of voices exploded as Kyle expected it would. The Aldermen shouted at Kyle and spoke over each other for several minutes before Knight restored order.

“I think I can speak for all the Aldermen,” Knight said formally. “That idea we can not consider. Our Lord forbids us to harm our fellow men. Nothing justifies violence, ever. I am shocked that I’m forced to remind you of that.”

“We’re already too vulnerable,” Kyle plowed on ahead with his argument. “We don’t have any space capability. They could just drop asteroids on us until we’re dead. It’s prudent to take some precautions.”

“You’ve just defeated your own argument. There will be no victory for us if we fight. Only our faith can protect us.”

“God would not have watched over us this long to abandon us now, brother,” Alderman Mercer offered. “Surely you have watched the sinners a little too long.”

“Perhaps,” Kyle said. “And I pray that it is brother Christians above us.”

“It is,” Alderman Brown agreed. “But I respect your ideas. A little caution isn’t a bad thing.”

Carefully, Kyle worked to move more of the Aldermen towards a more realistic view of the possible dangers ahead.

#

“Settle down!” Aldermen Knight banged his gavel loudly on the dais. “We’re not niggers on a picnic!”

The assembled men in Alderman's Hall quieted down and took their seats on the long hard benches. Jacob sat quietly along with the rest of the dorm leaders. Nothing was expected of these boys other than to report back to their dorm what happened and enforce any edicts of the Aldermen. The real decisions would be made by the Aldermen with the help of the married men.

"More ships are up there!" A voice shouted from the far side of the hall.

"There's still just the one spaceship," Alderman Mercer replied.

"I've seen them, and I'm not alone." The man answered. The hall started to erupt into noisy chaos again as Alderman Knight banged his gavel again.

"There's just the one ship," Alderman Knight said with the same conviction with which he delivered his sermons. "What you are seeing, Brother Charles, are satellites released in orbit."

Knight banged the gavel, cutting off the murmur of conversation as it started. "Here's what we know," he said. "The ship is a shuttle, much like our own. We haven't seen the ship it came from, but Peter is searching for it now." Alderman Knight let his gaze shift back and forth across the hall.

"Whoever they are, they have stayed in a polar orbit. I think this is important. They could have tried to hide from us, but they haven't. This is a sign that these are our brothers fleeing the tyranny of Earth and we should be ready to welcome them."

The double doors to Alderman's hall flew open and Peter, Havilah's astronomer, hurried up to the dais.

"We've found the mothership," He said, nearly tripping over himself in excitement. "We can't be certain, but it looks like a one-way colony ship. They're coming to stay!"

Chapter 7

“Estimated population of the squatters is ten thousand, plus or minus fifteen hundred.” Margaret’s lecture was clean, precise, and clinical: too clinical in Daniel’s opinion. They may be squatters, but they were people, too.

The Governing Council of Seclusion sat in session, watching intently as Margaret presented an analysis of the illegal settlement.

Margaret primarily used a holo-projector manifested in the overhead PEM surface, but she augmented her presentation with still images displayed on the bulkhead. Now, as they neared the end of analysis, the bulkheads appeared like an art gallery of colonial expansion. All of it the squatters’ city.

“A number of the structures are constructed from the remains of their starship; the rest appear to be a form of concrete and wood-analogues.”

Behind Margaret, images of the colony obtained by Daniel and Edward flashed. This was very much an intelligence briefing, and just as warm.

“My analysis is hampered by our surveillance capability,” Margaret explained. “Our satellites were designed for weather and geographic surveys. It was impossible to get a resolution much better than a meter and a half square.”

“The squatters first settled at the south end of the bay, along the estuary. The buildings in this area are older, and show signs of being constructed from the colony ship that brought them here. There are few ‘residential’ buildings in the squatter colony and none in this older section. The structures here are power-supply, water treatment, fabrication buildings and the like.”

“North of the ‘industrial district’ are newer buildings, including twenty-six barracks. Computer estimates are that something on the order of three thousand people may be living in those barracks.”

Margaret paused for effect.

“About a third of the population?” Todd asked.

“About,” Margaret agreed. “That’s a pretty high level of militarization.” Margaret returned to her presentation.

“With many of the buildings in the center of the city, we can only guess at their purpose. It’s likely they are government and administration buildings, but this one is different.”

The holo-projection zoomed to fill the display with a large stadium-like building.

“This is a stadium sufficient to hold the entire squatter colony during rallies.” Margaret looked across the Council. “Of course, we have no idea what it is they are rallying for.”

“The two structures of the greatest interest are the wall surrounding the primary settlement and the large building extending out into Horsehead Bay.”

A holographic display appeared above the center of the conference table. It was a large building; the lower half of the walls were made from concrete, tinted green, while the upper half and roof were a bright shining alloy.

“This computer-enhanced image gives us a better visual of the building.”

The holo rotated, giving the council a full three-hundred-sixty-degree view of the structure.

The building started ashore, but extended out for more than one hundred meters into the waters of the sheltered bay. At the bay end of the building a set of large doors, at least thirty meters wide, was sealed shut.

“Looks like a hanger,” Edward commented.

“Exactly.” Margaret froze the image with the hanger facing the council. “While they dismantled their starship, they have taken extensive measures to preserve their space flight capability.”

“Nothing sinister about that, Margaret,” Captain Domingo offered from his position as observer of the Council. “We plan to do exactly the same thing.”

“We plan to exploit the resources of this system.” Margaret swept her hand over the controls, and an image of Seclusion replaced the image of the hanger. “They didn’t have a single satellite in orbit, and there’s no indication of recent fusion activity.”

“They build a great big hanger, and they never fly the bird?” Herb leaned over on one elbow and let his fingers play with one ear. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It makes sense if the shuttle is too valuable to risk on weather or mineral resources.” Margaret restored a shot of the colony taken from directly over head. “I think it’s a military resource to the squatters.”

“Oh, come on!” Oliver threw his hands up in front of him. “You’re just projecting your fear there, Margaret.”

“Just hold on, Oliver.” Margaret raised her hands to beg for time from Oliver. “I didn’t get here unsupported.”

The holo-display switched to an enhanced image of the wall surrounding the perimeter of the settlement.

“This wall is three meters high on the average,” Margaret continued. “It is not a fence, but a full security wall -- topped with razor wire and anti-personnel spikes. The area beyond of the wall has been cleared of any cover for about a hundred and sixty meters. That’s a pretty wide killing field.”

Daniel had to concede that the wall was an ugly affair. It looked of a nasty war.

“The squatters committed serious resources to the building this fortification.”

“That is just loaded language!” Oliver exploded.

“Let her finish,” Daniel said.

“Thank you, Daniel.” Margaret took a moment to gather her thoughts, then continued.

“The settlement has a decided lack of family-unit dwellings.” The image switched again to the structures well inside the fortified perimeter. Large rectangular buildings abutted the green cultivated fields that supported the squatter city. Daniel tapped his display, a total of three thousand acres under cultivation, and all of it behind that monster of a wall.

“The purpose of the various buildings was easily determined, and there isn’t much chance of error here, Oliver.” Margaret tossed a look directly at the biologist, but continued on.

“Power and manufacturing capability is pretty much what we would expect from a supplied colony ship of almost two centuries ago. They have preserved their limited technological base, including weapon capability.”

The two-dee image behind Margaret flicked into existence on the bulkhead, and a false-color video began to play.

“The recording, captured automatically by the shuttle cameras, is from a forested area about twenty kilometers north of the squatters settlement.”

For several seconds nothing happened in the recording, then several small orange flashes quickly appeared and vanished.

“Rifle fire,” Margaret explained. “High energy projectiles, possibly electrothermally enhanced firearms.”

Suddenly, the forest was alive with rifle fire. While contained to one small section of the wood, the firing was nearly continuous for several seconds.

“Computer estimate is that something on the order of thirteen hundred rounds were discharged in this attack.”

“Holy Mother of God,” Captain Domingo uttered softly.

The council, even Oliver, was silent.

Margaret switched off the display and brought up the lights of the council chamber.

“We have to face facts. This squatter colony is a paranoid, militaristic cult, and their assault on the native life of Seclusion indicates they are xenophobic as well.”

“That’s a lot to conclude without speaking with any of them.” Oliver stood at his seat and pointed at her. “If anyone in the system is paranoid, it’s you, Margaret.”

“Oh, just open your eyes before you get them shot out.” Margaret stood from her seat and leaned across the table towards Oliver, glaring at him. “This is not a colony of Buddhists looking for enlightenment!”

“Settle down, people.” Todd’s voice was firm and unyielding. “We’re going to discuss this calmly and rationally.” He glared at both of them, his eyes daring them to contest him.

“The immediate question,” Herb said into the small silence that followed. “Is, what are we going to do about it?”

“I can tell you what we can’t do. There’s no way we can fly to our alternate.” Captain Domingo stood from his seat off to the side. “The Independence isn’t space-worthy anymore, much less jump-worthy. Whatever we do, we have to do it right here.”

“We’re going to have to play it lightly.” Herb’s bass voice was unusually free from humor. “They outnumber us about two-to-one, and we didn’t outfit the colony for a fight.”

“For Christ sake! Is anyone seriously thinking about violence!” Now Oliver stood. He stalked around the table, addressing everyone directly. “We did not come out here, at great risk, to fight a war with people we don’t even know!”

“I wasn’t suggesting that...”

“You were putting the idea out there, Herb. First, it something that is thinkable, then it goes to something that is plan-able, then to something that is doable, and then by God, its something that gets done!” Oliver stormed up to the table, slamming his fist down hard. “I won’t be a party to it!”

“Fine,” Margaret said coolly. “I’m sure that sort of thinking will do Annie a world of good as the Independence de-orbits.”

“Don’t try that crap with me, Margaret. I’m not falling for it.”

“She’s not wrong.”

All eyes turned towards Dr. Wells. A heartbeat of silence hung in the chamber; Elizabeth’s thin, long face was tense with conflicting emotions.

“That doesn’t mean Margaret is right either.” Elizabeth looked down to the surface of the desk, as if ashamed of what she was thinking. “We don’t know what kind of people we are dealing with. That means we have to be ready for the worst.”

Oliver turned to say something, but Catherine interrupted them both before he or Dr. Wells could utter another sound.

“Oliver, I want a home for Ryan and Todd and me, not a battlefield. Dr. Well is right, people aren’t always what we want them to be. Maybe those people down there want to be our friends; God I hope so. They must have a deep knowledge of Seclusion. We need that! But, we can’t count on it. I don’t know any anything about squatter colonies, or what they are like...”

“I do.” Daniel sighed as the attention of the Council fixed on him. “I’ve seen two, and read reports of several about more in the Corps’ records.”

Memories best left undisturbed, bubbled to the surfaced of Daniel’s mind. There was nothing to do but dive into it, get through it as quickly as possible.

“The first one we found was so happy to be discovered, they couldn’t wait for a league ship to show up and ferry them back to home. But that colony was just hanging on, just one hundred and sixty-odd people. This one,” Daniel gestured towards the display. “Is thriving. They couldn’t have started with more than three or four thousand tops, and more like one or two. They’ve got a good, going concern down there. I wouldn’t bet on them wanting to head home; Seclusion is home.”

“You know about the other one,” Daniel said softly.

The Council chamber fell silent as the ghost of the *Anson* hung in the compartment. Daniel knew that the rest of the council thought they knew the story, but they didn’t. He was the only who really knew what happened.

"I'm sorry, Daniel." Margaret's voice was soft, almost melodic.

"Yeah, sorry buys a lot at the store." Daniel regretted saying it even before he finished. It wasn't Margaret's fault they were in a pickle -- everyone only wanted what was best for Seclusion.

"So what do we do?" Oliver asked.

"We don't decide anything while we're feeling are running high." Todd stood from his seat. "We think about it, we come up with ideas, and most importantly, we try to find out more about the squatters. Meeting adjourned."

Daniel couldn't muster the energy to get up, so he let his head go to the cool surface of the table and listened as the Governing Council exited behind him.

He knew it was Catherine before she spoke. Perhaps it was a scent, or the rhythm of her steps, but Daniel knew it was she stepping up behind him. Gently her hand touched on his shoulder, then she leaned in to hug him from behind, her small frame resting placidly on his large, broad back.

"No one ever thinks about how heroes get to be heroes, do they?" She asked.

"Sure they do." He spoke softly, slowly. "But they still don't understand."

Catherine kissed him lightly on the nape of the neck, and whispered in his ear.

"I'll always be here for you, love."

#

"Why does it have to be another splinter colony?" Daniel asked as he sat on the edge of the bed. Catherine sat next to him, her large brown eyes looking up into his.

"This isn't the same thing," Catherine said. "Everything is going to turn out fine."

"No, it's not." Daniel laid back on the bed, throwing one arm across his eyes. "I can feel it in my bones."

"No, what you're feeling, my love, is misplaced guilt." Catherine pulled Daniel's arm off his face and stared deep into his eyes.

"You did what you had to on the *Anson*." She leaned in close until her face was millimeters from his own. "You saved countless lives."

"I was a coward." Daniel rolled away from Catherine. "When the shooting started I hid. When they started cutting throats, I did nothing."

"It's not your fault," Catherine moved up against Daniel's broad back and embraced him tight. "You had no choice."

Daniel didn't answer. How could Catherine ever begin to understand? How could anyone? Naomi, Jack, David and the rest of the crew knew that Daniel hadn't been caught. They kept that secret, even as their throats were cut. What did Daniel do? Nothing.

A war raged inside Daniel between his mind and his soul. He knew Catherine was right, there had been nothing he could do. It wasn't until they were in flight that an opportunity had presented itself, but his soul didn't agree. Guilt screamed inside him.

"You're not a coward," Catherine insisted. "I couldn't love a coward." He felt her lips press to his neck for a gentle reassuring kiss.

For the moment, with Catherine's support and love, his mind silences his soul and the guilt recedes a little.

"God, I need you," he said and he turned to face her.

"I'll always be here for you," she said.

Catherine stayed only just over an hour. Logically, Daniel knew she couldn't stay with him. There were deceptions to be run and secrets to be kept, but he longed for something more than just a few moments of understanding and comfort. It was always like this, and somehow he couldn't break free from the pattern. While they were together everything felt so perfect, so right. Once she left, the depression and guilt descended on him, crushing him like no high-gee liftoff had ever done.

There would be punishment for this. A day of judgment.

Unable to stand his quarters, and memories too intense, Daniel dressed and stormed out into the passageways of the Independence. Every time he swore he would put an end to this, every time he vowed to make it the last. How could he be so damned weak? It wasn't as though Todd didn't love Catherine, and Catherine knew that he loved her. But damn it, there they were again, like thieves in the shadows. Margaret should have listened to that blowhard Senator -- he knew more about human nature than she thought.

Daniel stopped and looked around. His angry stomping about had brought him to one of the ship's observation galleries. The deck curved gently up and away, and on the far side of the gallery a large bay window had been permanently programmed into the PEM surface. A gallery of seats faced the illusionary window, at this late hour Daniel was the only person present.

Daniel sat down. There were no smart fibers here, and the seating was a quasi-Victorian design of wood and brass. From the hard seating Daniel watched the procession of stars and Seclusion parade past the gallery. Some people never adapted to the ever rotating view from the observation gallery, but Daniel found it relaxing. There was the black of

space, followed by the planet as it slid into view from the far side of the window. Then there was only the planet. Its strange autumn colored jungles and forests, its deep blue oceans, and white polar caps. So much like Earth, but not at all like Earth. Simultaneously, it felt both familiar and new.

“Daniel!” Todd voice rang out in the observation gallery.

Daniel looked over at Todd. For a moment, he was tempted to confess. To get rid of this damnable guilt, but Todd didn’t give him a chance to speak.

“We’re getting a radio signal from the squatters.”

Chapter 8

“Order!, I will have order in here!” Alderman Knight banged the gavel so hard, the head flew off into the gallery of Alderman’s Hall.

The air buzzed with an electric charge of excitement and anticipation. Jacob, along with six Watchmen under his direction, moved among the rows of the gallery, trying to quiet down things a least a little. Behind the second row of benches, Jacob found Alderman’s Knight gavel-head. He scooped it up and hurried to the dais to give it to Alderman Knight.

“Thank you, Jacob,” Alderman Knight said softly. Knight turned back to his fellow Aldermen. “I believe Alderman Brock had the floor.”

“Thank you, sir,” Alderman Brock replied. “I did not mean to impugn Alderman Knight’s motives or actions, but we should be more cautious. I think it was a mistake to broadcast signals directly at their craft first. We should have let them make the first overtures.”

“Alderman Brock,” Thomas Brown, Alderman and supervisor of Havilah’s fields and farms spoke up. “These are not beasts of the forest, but fellow Christians fleeing persecution.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the assembled men of Havilah. Jacob noticed a heavy sigh escaping from Alderman Brock. The Alderman’s expression was the same as when he counseled new Watchmen on the realities of the job.

“We don’t know that, Alderman Brown,” Brock said. “They could just as easily be here to take us back to the camps.”

The Hall erupted again in shouts and voices. Alderman Brock was well known for his skepticism -- often he had dug out the truth of a

crime when others would have accepted what they first saw, but today his nature was winning him no friends.

“My friend,” Alderman Knight said. “If they were coming to capture us, they would not have assumed such a prominent orbit.” Knight turned in his seat to face the Brock directly. Jacob became acutely aware of the difference between Havilah’s oldest and most senior Alderman and its youngest.

“He’s right,” Alderman Brown agreed, “There are enough moons and asteroids around Goliath that they could have easily hid from us.”

“I agree it looks good,” Alderman Brock conceded. “But, looks can be deceiving.”

The debate continued deep into the evening. It was near midnight before Alderman Knight adjured the Aldermen.

“Jacob,” Brock said as he walked around the dais. “Mind speaking with me for a few moments?”

“No, sir,” Jacob replied as he fell in step with Brock. Together they walked out of Alderman’s Hall and headed for the bay.

“It’s not too tough being a Watchman in Havilah,” Alderman Brock.

“People are basically good,” Jacob agreed.

“The people of Havilah are basically good,” Brock corrected. “That’s not true for those who have lost their way, is it?”

“I don’t know,” Jacob admitted. This wasn’t a conversation he had expected to have with Alderman Brock.

“I don’t really think that ship heading this way is coming to round us up.” Brock sat against a rock outcrop and looked out over the bay. “I also don’t think they are fellow Christians either. It’s another colony looking for a place to call their own, and they have their sights fixed on our home.”

“What do you think is going to happen?” Jacob asked.

“I don’t know, Jacob.” Brock sighed in the darkness and stared up at the stars. “We were lucky to find Havilah. Even before the Founding Fathers left Earth they knew that shirt-sleeve planets were mighty rare.”

“God led them here, protecting his children,” Jacob replied.

“God tends to protect those who are prepared,” Brock turned to face Jacob. “I should clear you to read the Founders’ logs of their journey. You’re a good man and a good watchman.”

“I’m not married yet,” Jacob answered.

“There’s more to being a man than having a wife and child. A real man sees his duty and doesn’t shy away from it.” Brock patted the rock beside himself, inviting Jacob to sit.

“When you’re out hunting a beast do you check your rifle to make sure everything is working perfectly?” Brock asked.

“Of course,” Jacob replied.

“You don’t trust to the Lord to make sure the gun is loaded and working, you do it yourself.”

“Do not tempt the Lord,” Jacob answered solemnly.

“That’s Alderman Knight’s answer,” Brock looked back up at the stars. “The rest of the universe is much less caring. Either someone is prepared and ready for the dangers that lurk out there, from beast and man, or you’re just asking for something bad to happen to you.”

“God has protected us here,” Jacob insisted.

“Maybe,” Brock stood and stretched his arms. “But God seems to favor the hunting team that’s better prepared. We have to be prepared for the offworlders.”

“Do you really think they are a danger?” Jacob remained sitting on the rock, wishing he knew just what Alderman Brock was trying to say.

“I hope that they aren’t,” Brock said slowly. “We’re doing well here, but we could be doing a lot better. New machines and new medicines would make a huge difference to Havilah.” Brock stepped a few steps away, almost disappearing totally in the darkness.

“We’ve done better than anyone had any right to expect. Colonies, even with the best of support, have a lousy track record.”

“God was watching out over ours.” It disturbed Jacob just how much Alderman Brock was willing to dismiss the hand of God in things. It was evident that Havilah was part of his plan. A big part.

“God wasn’t watching out for Stephanie Moore,” Brock turned back to face Jacob, the gray light from Goliath washing out the Alderman’s face until it appeared like a corpse’s.

Stephanie’s murder had occurred just after Jacob had began working as a Watchman, two years ago about his fifteenth birthday. The first murder in Havilah in sixty-three years. The neighbors were there before Harold had even finished cutting, but no one could have saved her.

“Alderman Knight says no man can know God’s reasons. We have to accept it.” Even as he said, Jacob didn’t really believe that. You didn’t accept what was wrong -- you stopped it.

“God watches for those who are prepared.” Brock repeated.

“Havilah looks to us, the Watchmen, to keep order and to keep them safe.”

“And we do,” Jacob insisted.

“Yes we do, and we will keep doing so, Jacob.” Brock stepped forward, becoming more visible to Jacob. “That’s why we have to be ready for anything when the visitors finally land.”

“I’ll be ready and so will the Watchmen,” Jacob insisted.

“Tomorrow I want you and the rest of the Watchmen to practice subduing people who are resisting.” Brock came forward and rested a hand on Jacob’s shoulder. “People in Havilah respect the Watchmen, but we can’t assume that others will.”

“Yes, sir.” Jacob hopped off the boulder, standing tall for his mentor.

“Let’s get up to the radio,” Brock suggested. “Maybe this is all worrying over nothing.”

As they walked through the deserted streets Jacob found himself thinking of Cindi. So much was happening, yet here in the quiet moments he found her smile and the bounce of her hair pushing everything else in his mind aside. It was hard to imagine the rest of his life without her.

“Why did you never remarry?” Jacob asked Brock.

“That came out of nowhere,” Brock replied.

“I’m sorry, it’s not my place, sir.” Jacob turned his head away, embarrassed by his presumption.

“No, it is your place,” Brock said. “We are our brother’s keepers.” Alderman Brock stopped and looked back at the fishing fleet, tied to their piers.

“Did it hurt too much? Was that why?” Jacob asked following his gaze back to the ships.

“At first,” Brock admitted. “I threw myself into my work. It’s why I wanted to be an Alderman. To devote myself to Havilah, devote myself to something.”

“You’ve been a great Alderman,” Jacob said. “You’ve taught me a lot.”

“Now, you teach me something, Jacob,” Brock said. “Why is this suddenly on your mind?”

Jacob turned his face away again, afraid that Brock would see his embarrassed blush, even in this dim light.

“Cindi, isn’t it?” Alderman Brock asked. Jacob nodded.

“She’s a great girl,” Brock commented. “I was about your age when I met Naomi. I just couldn’t imagine living my life without her.”

“I’m scared to try to live without her,” Jacob admitted. “But I’m also scared to trying and failing. It wouldn’t be fair to her to do that.”

“You’ve just convinced me you’re right for her,” Brock said simply. Jacob turned and looked at the Alderman. He was smiling, gently.

“You’re so concerned about her. Doing her wrong,” Brock explained. “That is the best sign of a lasting love.”

“I wish I could be sure.”

“Nothing is certain. Live your life by three rules and you’ll be okay. One: Be good and true to Havilah, she is the mother of us all. Two: Be good and honest with the people of Havilah. We have created the best community man has ever made, and three: Do right by yourself and your neighbor. If you do that, everything else will take care of itself.” Brock threw his head back and laughed. “Listen to me, making sermons myself.”

“It sounded pretty good to me,” Jacob said.

“As well it should.” Brock clapped a hand to Jacob’s shoulder and pulled him towards the radio building.

“Let’s just hope our new neighbors have something good to say. My biggest fear is that they aren’t saying anything,” he said as they walked the last few yards to the building.

“Why is that?” Jacob asked.

“They know we’re here,” Brock said as he reached out for the doorknob. “Silence means they don’t care to talk, and that always is bad in human history.”

The radio shack was one of the original buildings, built by the first settlers of Havilah. Because of this, it was made from the hull and other material scavenged from their colony starship instead of the greenish local concrete, or deep red woods.

Inside, there was very little space for people, and the two rooms were cluttered with equipment, batteries, and the emergency generator. There was just enough room for the radio operator, and four or five people. Any more than that, and they would have to be very friendly.

Troy leaned over the radio, intently listening to a signal as Jacob and Alderman Brock entered. Troy had discarded the simple headset and listened on the broadcasting speakers.

“All total, we killed fifty-six beasts.” John Washington's voice projected clear over the radio. “Bless the Lord we didn’t lose anyone, but we are short of ammunition and will be returning to Havilah.”

“Sounds like a good hunt,” Troy replied. “Wish I could have been there. I’ve got really big news for when you get back.”

“Tell me now.” John sounded annoyed.

“Can’t, Alderman Brock has just walked in. I have to switch. Don’t worry, you’ll find out before you’ve taken two steps inside the walls.” Troy switched off the radio and turned to face Alderman Brock and Jacob.

“Hello, Alderman, Jacob,” Troy said cheerfully.

“What reply have you gotten?” Knight asked.

“None.”

There was a moment of silence.

“You’ve received no reply?” Alderman Brock asked again.

“Yes, sir, that’s right. They’re as silent as the grave up there.”

Chapter 9

“What do you mean, we can’t talk to them?” Oliver was incredulous as he stared at Catherine.

The Governing Council sat at their conference table; the images from Daniel’s and Edward’s reconnaissance, along with Margaret’s analysis, still manifested themselves along the walls.

“They’re way down there on the spectrum. We don’t have the equipment to broadcast on their frequency, and to make matters worse, they’re using a digital standard I’m totally unfamiliar with.” Daniel could hear the exhaustion and exasperation in Catherine’s voice. She was a person who didn’t like ‘no’, or ‘I can’t’, as an answer. Undoubtedly, she hated giving it out herself.

“I can solve the transmitter problem,” Margaret offered. “But the standards issue is Catherine’s camp.”

“I will, eventually, crack their standard, but it will take my team time.” Catherine blew a bit of black hair from her face. “Tackling digital standards two hundred years out-of-date was not on my mission parameters.”

“Daniel,” Todd said. “How did the Explorer Corps handle this?”

“Well,” Daniel twisted his neck, trying to work out stiffness he was feeling. “We carried broad spectrum broadcasting capability. After all, we expect to find orphan colonies from time to time. But, if we couldn’t raise them, we landed and said hi.”

“Seems practical.” Herb shifted his large frame in his seat. “Better than sitting up here spinning our wheels on what we think this or that means.”

“Too dangerous.” Catherine shook her head so vigorously her hair flew back and forth across her face. “We can afford to wait until I crack the standard.”

“How long will it take you?” Margaret asked.

"I can't say." Catherine's face contorted as she replied. "We have decent programmers and network specialists, but we clearly aren't the League's best."

"Don't put yourself down, honey." Todd reached over and patted his wife's hand.

"Just being honest, Todd. We will crack it, but it could take a week or more."

"Seems a reasonable time to wait," Todd offered.

"Perhaps not." Daniel drew the Council's attention back to his seat. "We know that the people on Seclusion already know we are here. If we ignore them, and they can very well perceive it as being ignored, for a week or more, that could make matters worse."

"And there's the man-rating of the Independence issue. I'm not happy with an extra week on the ship." Margaret tapped the table in front of her in a steady insistent beat. "We need to know, and we need to know now."

"No, we don't." Catherine's voice gained a bit of volume. "We can wait until this communication mess is sorted out, if it takes a week or a month. Sending people down there before we've even said hello is reckless."

"It could be worse to leave them wondering." Daniel ran his fingers through his curly hair. "They are looking up at us every time we pass over them. We don't say anything -- we don't reply. That sort of thing can make people real nervous."

"Especially paranoid militaristic types," Margaret said.

"Even if they aren't." Daniel tried to drag the subject away from Margaret's conjecture about the squatters. "I'm not suggesting we go right away, but we can't wait too long."

"Margaret, how long until you've rigged something to transmit down to where they are on the spectrum?" Todd asked as he tapped at the system console in front of him.

"Twelve, maybe eighteen hours, there's nothing tough there."

"Okay, I suggest we don't do anything before then. Perhaps Catherine will have cracked the standards problem, and the call to go down uninvited will be moot."

"Uninvited?" Margaret's anger was a living force in the meeting room.

"Unannounced. Sorry, it was a poor choice of words, Margaret."

"It's our world Todd, not theirs. They're thieves, we shouldn't forget that."

"A thief knows he's taking something that doesn't belong to him. This world didn't belong to anyone when they got here," Oliver said.

Daniel groaned -- it was generally better to let Margaret run until she had unwound, not spin her up again.

"It wasn't theirs -- they knew that much!"

"It wasn't anyone's, Margaret, can't you understand that concept? Taking something no one owns is not stealing." Oliver turned his chair and faced Margaret directly. Daniel fought to suppress a smile as the rest of the Governing Council slipped from the seats and left the chambers, unnoticed by Oliver or Margaret.

"Not going to escape, Danny?" Herb whispered as he passed Daniel's seat.

"Someone's got to make sure they don't kill each other," Daniel said around a soft chuckle.

"And they say joining the Explorer Corps is a sign of insanity." Herb shook his head and walked out of the room.

"Daniel! You'll back me up on this won't you?" Oliver shouted over Margaret's head.

"On what? I was talking with Herb."

"Most of the pre-League colonies were like us. Looking for a place to live and be left alone. Not," Oliver shot a withering glance in Margaret's direction. "Ship-loads of nuts armed for war."

"Most, not all," Daniel agreed. "But there was some nastiness that happened back then."

"Tell him about it." Margaret crossed her arms and sat back in her chair.

"I don't need a history lesson."

"Perhaps we all do." Daniel made a steeple of intertwined fingers and rested his chin on it. "There were a few idealistic communes that launched out during the big grab. We'd be really lucky if that is what is under us right now."

"I doubt that it's longhairs from a couple of centuries ago." Margaret said skeptically.

"You can't rule it out, no matter what you think you've observed." Oliver taunted Margaret again.

"There were also some very nasty people. One group in particular didn't have the funds to stake their own colonization outfit." Daniel looked up from his fingers to make sure Oliver was listening and not just ignoring him.

"They murdered thirty-six hundred colonists, stole their outfitted ship and blasted for the translation point."

The chamber was silent as Daniel let the implication set in.

"They never made it to the jump-point. A U.S. Cruiser intercepted them and destroyed them."

Daniel stood up and stretched out his large frame.

“Hope for the best and prepare for the worst. It’s hard to go wrong like that, Oliver.”

Daniel turned and walked out of the compartment. He wished he could have given Oliver some solid, feel-good prediction about what they were going to find, but nothing was certain out here in the wild, except surprises.

#

“This isn’t like you,” Edward said as Margaret rested on his chest. Damn it, why couldn’t he be like most men who just wanted to go sleep afterwards? Margaret really didn’t feel like talking right now. She wanted to enjoy the warm afterglow, that release of tension that had, for a few moments, driven everything else from her mind.

“We can’t do anything about the squatters, so we really shouldn’t worry about them any more than is necessary.” Edward prattled on. “You’re getting too upset over it.”

“This is lousy post-screwing chat, Edward. Even for you, my love.”

“Yeah, but after sex is when you’re the least volatile, my little bomb.” Edward reached down and tickled her waist, jolting Margaret to her side of the bed. He rolled over, following her, until he was on his stomach, one arm draped across her.

“What do you want me to do? Pretend that everything will work fine and dandy?”

“It still might; you really don’t know.” Edward snuggled closed, burying his face in her shoulder. “That’s the point. Don’t worry about what can’t be helped.”

“Closing your eyes doesn’t change your vector, does it?” Margaret idly played with Edward’s hair as she spoke. “Think of this like a piloting plot. You can’t just hope it all works out when you get to your destination. You have to plan, and you have to make it work out. The universe isn’t going to give you a hand.”

“It isn’t going to stab you in the back, either. It’s neutral, it just doesn’t care.”

“But we aren’t dealing with the universe; we’re dealing with people. They’ll do whatever it takes to keep what they have stolen.” Margaret sat up, forcing Edward to move to one side. “And that doesn’t take into consideration slime like Senator Kellenberg. God, there’s trouble we don’t need.”

“That’s over and done with,” Edward said. “You can forget about him.”

“It’s not over until we’ve fulfilled our charter requirements. Until then we can be jerked around by the League.”

“It gets worse from there, love,” Margaret added. “They could just rule the squatters have prior claim and give the planet to them. Or force us to amend our charter to accept them into our colony. There goes our chance to live as we want to live.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Oh, yes.” Margaret lay back down and stared up to the ceiling in the darkness. “You heard that slime, Kellenberg. We’re perverts, just waiting to ambush little kids. Those squatters down there hold our fates in their hands.”

There a long moment of silence, and Margaret had thought that Edward had at last fallen asleep, when he spoke.

“What can we do?”

“Keep our eyes open, and don’t rule out any options. We’re only getting one shot at this.”

“There are other planets.” Edward’s voice had no conviction; Margaret doubted he felt any at all.

“Our capitol is gone. We couldn’t swing another colony setup, even if the voyeurs let us win one.” Margaret turned away from Edward, not wanting to risk him seeing the tears in her eyes. “One shot to do this right, that’s all we’re going to get.”

Damn, this project was becoming less and less hers. The idea had been simple. Make a place where someone could live in privacy. Take the risk on an unknown planet for something better. Edward had gone along easily enough, but he was a dear and never really stood in her way. Selling her patents and designs has gotten Margaret enough seed money to get the colony project started, but far from enough to fund it herself. Margaret had counted on selling enough homestead plots to keep Seclusion alive, but while they sold, they didn’t sell fast enough to make it work. Colonies failed too often, people wanted someone they trusted in charge, and Margaret hadn’t been able to close that deal.

Daniel seemed like the perfect answer at the time. There was hardly a person in the League who hadn’t seen his face, and heroes were great public relations. Once Daniel signed on to the project, the homesteads started selling. Then Daniel brought Todd and Catherine aboard, Margaret had agreed that they needed a top administrator to run and organize things. Overnight it seemed Seclusion went from her dream to a limited liability partnership. She was just one of the partners. Every week she felt more and more like a junior partner.

She vowed to herself this wasn't going to fail, and it wasn't going to be taken from her. Senator Slimebag failed; she wasn't going to let a bunch of squatters give him another shot, whatever it took.

#

"Thanks, I know it's late," Daniel said as Oliver walked up to his lab.

"Don't think about it. Aileen is watching Annie," Oliver said as he opened the hatch. "I think she does it secretly hoping it will get her into your good graces."

"Aileen's a good kid." Daniel scooped up a pile of flimsies from a chair and added them to a pile already threatening to topple.

"She not a kid, Daniel."

"You know what I mean. Don't pester me Oliver." Daniel looked away from the agronomist, certain that his sin was plain for everyone to see.

"If I can't pester you, why did you call me here?"

"I want to talk about the squatters."

"Don't call them that." Oliver's face darkened over; the arguments with Margaret had clearly taken their toll.

"Sorry, what should we call them?"

"People? Human beings?"

"Kind of vague, don't you think?" As he spoke Daniel took out a data cartridge with Margaret's assessment of the squatters and popped it into one of Oliver's terminals.

"Settlers is non-threatening," Oliver offered. "So is homesteaders, and both are accurate."

"Okay, let's talk about Fortress Homestead." Daniel puled up the image of the colony from orbit and displayed it in the holotank between himself and Oliver.

"Fortress is a..."

"... loaded term. I know, but that doesn't make it a wrong one."

Daniel magnified the image of the wall until it dominated the holotank.

"That is a fort, Oliver. What we need to know is why do they have it?"

"I don't know. None of us do."

"But you can make some educated guesses." Daniel sat back down in his seat and pointed at the enclosure. "Could that be for wildlife?"

"I don't see why not."

“Don’t be dense, Oliver, it isn’t becoming on you,” Daniel snapped. “That thing is not a fence, and it wasn’t easy to build. I’ve been on a lot of alien worlds, seen all sorts of animals and plants.”

Daniel pointed at the wall.

“I have never seen an animal that would require that sort of defense.”

“Just because you haven’t seen doesn’t mean it isn’t there.”

“I know that. Margaret may not, but I do.” Daniel nervously ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t like Margaret’s assessment anymore than you do, but it is a possible, hell, a likely explanation for what we’re seeing.”

“I’m not convinced.”

“Good, I don’t want you to be. You don’t get this. It’s not about who is right and who is wrong, it’s about keeping our eyes open and not getting trapped into a preconception of what is going on before we know what is going on.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Give me a convincing argument why they need that.”

“I can’t do that, Daniel.” Oliver sat back in his seat and gestured with both hands facing up. “I don’t have enough information. The only one who can answer you is the homesteaders.”

“Okay, let’s play around with it. Let’s assume it is because of wildlife. Why not just a wooden stockade? That would be easier to build, and quicker too.” Daniel paced inside the small lab.

“Could be a couple of reasons. Something out there is stronger than a wooden stockade, something along the lines of an elephant.”

“We haven’t seen anything like that in the region.”

“As you love to point out, our probe data is almost two hundred years old and spotty at best.” Oliver smiled as he turned Daniel’s words back on him.

“I was talking about the surveillance Edward and I did.” Daniel absentmindedly picked up some of Oliver’s flimsies and sorted through them as he spoke. “What else?”

“Maybe your animal is clever enough that a wood stockade isn’t sufficient?”

“How so?”

“Perhaps it would take it apart. Work beams out of place to make holes and such.”

“That would make them pretty smart.”

“Yeah, like a squirrel.”

“What do you mean?” Daniel put the flimsies down and turned back toward Oliver.

“Ever had a bird feeder?” Oliver smiled as Daniel shook his head ‘no’. “Then you’ve not fought the battle of the squirrels. Squirrels are amazingly clever animals. They will work out locks, latches, and traps to get to the birdseed. Squirrels will even work cooperatively to get at the food. All this from something most people consider to be a rat with a good P.R. agent.”

“That wasn’t built for squirrels.”

“No, I think it’s safe to say that wasn’t built for an arboreal herbivore.”

“If it is for wildlife, it’s for a predator. God, if that’s true, we’re talking about some little nasty.” Daniel switched off the holotank.

“And we could have discussed this in the morning. It could have waited.” Oliver stood gave Daniel a direct stare. “What’s really on your mind?”

“This is. The good of the colony.” Daniel collected the data cartridge and walked out the lab.

Daniel stalked off to the nearest mess deck, angry that Oliver had seen what he himself hadn’t. Damn it, this was what was on his mind, he tried to tell himself. It didn’t work, of course. If he were here, exploring theories with Oliver then he wasn’t in his quarters where Catherine could find him. He knew that the real reason he had dragged Oliver out of bed was to prevent himself from getting into his own.

Selecting a mug of pseudo-coffee from the dispenser, Daniel sat down in the nearly empty mess deck and brooded.

Coffee was a good brooding drink, he decided. Hot, bitter, and not at all relaxing. How had he gotten himself into this mess?

That didn’t matter, one part of his minded said. What mattered was, how was he going to get out of it? He could just tell Catherine it was over, but he knew how much that would hurt her, and as much as Daniel needed to find a way out, it couldn't be by causing her grief.

“Can I join you, Danny?” Aileen asked, jolting Daniel from his thoughts.

“Sure, but you can’t call me ‘Danny’.” Daniel waved noncommittally to the seat across the table. Aileen sat down, the aroma of her tea drifting into Daniel’s nose.

“You don’t like Danny?”

“Not even when I was a kid.” Daniel pushed his coffee away -- it was cold now anyway. “It was some P.R. guy’s idea. It would be good for the Corps and all that.”

“Oh.”

The silence between them was long and uncomfortable.

“What do you think will happen? With the squatters?” Aileen’s blue eyes tried to lock with Daniel’s, but he avoided her gaze. Daniel didn’t need to complicate his life any further.

“Probably we’ll talk, realize that there’s some sort of common ground, and make a deal. Maybe even bring them in under our charter.”

“We can do that?”

“Sure. It would be as though we settled two places instead of one as far as the League is concerned.”

“Seems like a win-win for everyone.”

“Assuming we can find common ground to work from.” Daniel toyed with his mug of cold coffee, sliding it from hand to hand.

“It’s tough finding common ground with just one person,” Aileen said shyly. “I hope we can do it with them.”

“Aileen, you don’t know me. I’m not the hero that the media syndicates made me out to be.”

“No, I don’t know you, Daniel.” Aileen slammed down her teacup, spilling tea across the table. “You haven’t given me, or anyone, a chance to know you.”

Embarrassed by Aileen’s affections and his own insular nature, Daniel stood up.

“I’m sorry, Daniel,” She added quickly. “I shouldn’t have snapped.”

“Perhaps you should have. It’s not you, Aileen, it’s me. I’m not fit company right now.”

Daniel turned away from the table and walked out of the mess.

#

“Wake up, Danny boy!” Herb voice boomed in Daniel’s quarters. Shaking his head to wake himself up, Daniel raised himself up on one arm and activated the holocomm. Herb’s rudy face appeared just inches from Daniel’s.

“I thought explorers were early risers?” Herb laughed heartily at his own joke. “You’re setting a bad example, Danny.”

“What it is, Herb? I had a lousy night’s sleep.”

“Catherine worked all night, and didn’t crack the standard.”

“That classifies as ‘no news’, Herb.” Daniel reached over to switch off the holocomm.

“But we’ve established voice communications, anyway.” Herb’s grinning face remained in the display.

“I’ll be right there.”

Chapter 10

“An analog carrier wave?” Jacob was sitting on the same large flat boulder from which he had watched Brian bathe several nights earlier.

“Yup.” Troy sat next to the boulder; a picnic lunch of fruit and breads was laid out next to him. “It was pretty slick of them. I don’t know how long we would have missed each other if we had kept to digital.”

“So what are you doing here?” Brian asked. “Shouldn’t you be running the radio, enjoying all the attention?”

“They ran everyone out, except for the Aldermen -- colony emergency.”

“Damn, I wish I knew what was going on,” Brian said.

“Alderman Knight will tell us,” Troy said as he stretched out lazily on the ground. “He won’t keep us in the dark.”

A tap of something coming to rest against the colony’s wall twenty yards west of them commanded the attention of the three boys.

Jacob felt his eyes bulge at the top of a ladder showing above the outer side of the twelve and a half foot wall. Behind him, Brian and Troy scrambled to get to their rifles.

Even as Jacob reached for his own rifle -- just a couple of feet from him on the boulder -- a *beast* flashed over the wall, springing from the ladder to land more than halfway between the boulder and the wall.

The *beast* sprinted forward, the four rear legs pumping fast as it ducked and weaved back and forth, throwing off the aim of the boys as it closed on Jacob. Its forward set of legs stretched out as it closed on Jacob.

Damn! This is the survivor of a hunt, he thought. Jacob's ears rang as the rifles behind him fired. He tried to ignore the crack of the rounds passing him as he pulled his own gun up and quickly settled it against his shoulder.

Time seemed to slow down and stretch out. Jacob had the curious feeling that he had all the time he needed to act, even as the beast rushed forward at him.

Brian and Troy's rounds missed, and the beast was nearly on top of him. Its forelimbs reached to grab Jacob from the boulder. Jacob was acutely aware of the mouth of razor sharp teeth just behind the grasping arms.

Aiming for the center of the *beast's* body, Jacob fired off three rounds in quick secession. This close, dodging no longer provided any protection from rifle fire. The three rounds slammed into the *beast's* torso, blasting out huge divots of flesh, and sending a shower of blood out the back of the *beast* as the rounds continued on their way. Mortally wounded, but not yet dead, momentum carried the *beast* forward towards Jacob.

Jacob quickly swung his rifle front him, attempting to block the *beast* as it hurtled into him.

The *beast* threw Jacob down, slamming Jacob hard onto the stone of the boulder. The air shot out of him in an explosive breath, but through the pain he held on to his rifle and pressed it to the *beast*, which still snarled and snapped its jaws, at Jacob's throat.

As he struggled with the dying animal, a rifle muzzle came close to the *beast's* head. Jacob squeezed his eyes shut. Deafened by the report as the rifle fired, Jacob felt he would never hear again -- but he also felt the *beast* go limp as blood and bone splattered onto his face.

Brian and Troy helped Jacob to his feet, steadying him as he stood there with the beast's blood still running off his face.

"Are you all right?" Brian shouted.

"The Good Lord will have to get me some new eardrums, but he watched out over me." Jacob shook his head and discovered that was a horrible mistake. The dizziness that overtook him made the world spin, and suddenly he found himself sitting in the dirt.

"Take it easy, Jacob." Troy offered his hand and helped Jacob back up onto the boulder. "That was a hell of a scare."

"Who the hell left a ladder outside the wall?" Jacob asked.

"Don't know. Whoever it was, they should be exiled, the fools." Troy kicked the body of the fallen *beast*.

The world started coming back into focus -- Brian hooked the ladder with the barrel of his rifle, bringing the ladder was back on the right side of the wall.

"Let's get back." Jacob managed to stand up -- slowly. "Before the scent of blood brings death-angels."

#

"I suggest we reveal as little as possible about Havilah." Kyle Brock stood leaning against one wall of the radio room as they waited for the rest of the Aldermen to arrive.

"There is a great deal that they have already learned, no doubt," Knight suggested.

"I agree, but we know nothing about them." Kyle moved from the wall and proceeded to pace inside the confines of the small room. "They can look down from orbit and estimate our numbers, what sort of technology we have, all manner of information. All we know is that their ship looks similar to the founders' vessel. We are at a serious disadvantage."

"Brothers shouldn't scheme for advantage or favors," Knight said. "That's what led Cain to trouble."

"And when we know that they are indeed our brothers, I will agree, but they could be Jews, or God help us, Secularists." Kyle turned his attention to Alderman Mercer, standing quietly near the back of the room.

"Do you feel it's unwise or wrong to be cautious?" Kyle asked Alderman Mercer.

"They do have an advantage over us already, Chief Alderman," Mercer said, a slight tone of apology in his voice.

"Let us see what they have to say before we start fearing them, shall we?" Knight turned back to the radio transmitter as the last of the Aldermen, Brown, entered the room.

"It's a shame we don't have video," Kyle said.

"We'll make do with what the Lord has provided," Knight replied.

"I am Chief Alderman Roger Knight of his Lord's colony of Havilah," Knight said boldly into the microphone.

"I am Todd Moss, Chief Executive Officer of the colony of Seclusion. With me are the other members of our Governing Council."

"And I am joined by the rest of our Aldermen," Knight replied. "Seclusion? That is an interesting name for your colony, sir."

"You've been away from Terra too long, Alderman." Todd's voice was clear in the small room.

"I've never been to Earth," Knight replied in his straightforward and humorless manner.

“Of course you haven’t,” the voice on the radio replied. “I meant it as a figure of speech. Seclusion is our dream, a place where people can live private lives.”

“I’m not sure I understand you.” Knight sounded perplexed.

“Society has changed much since your people left Earth,” Todd explained. “Throughout the League of the Solar System every space is monitored and no citizen has any privacy, something we treasure and have come here to find.”

“So Earth has finished becoming a police state?” Kyle said over Alderman Knight’s shoulder.

“That’s too strong a term,” Todd replied. “And you are?”

“That was Alderman Brock,” Knight explained. “I must admit it doesn’t sound very free to me.”

“Oh, people are free,” Todd said. “It’s just they have no privacy. Artificial Intelligences monitor everywhere for crime and distress, but that security is too costly.”

“I think I would tend to agree,” Knight shifted his weight in his chair. “Our forefathers also sought a place where we could live in peace and respect the ways of our Lord.”

“Which lord would that be?”

“The true Lord, Jehovah, of course.”

“So your colony is a Christian colony, Alderman Knight?” Todd asked.

“Indeed it is.” Kyle could see Knight’s chest expand with forbidden pride. “The Lord has blessed and watched over our people.” There were several moments of muted silence from the radio.

“They’ve muted their microphone,” Kyle suggested. “They could be up to something.”

“Do not mistake cynicism for wisdom, Alderman Brock,” Knight said.

“Caution is not cynicism. A *beast* cannot help its nature.” Kyle replied.

“My apologies,” Todd said as the radio snapped back to life.

“There are many faiths among our colonists; you must understand that there is concern about friction between us.”

“We are devoted to peace and have renounced war, my brother,” Knight said. “If there is violence, it will be you who have brought it to Havilah.”

“I assure you, we are also looking for peace, not war.”

Kyle reached over and tapped the mute on the radio.

“Do not speak too much about our pacifism,” Kyle suggested.

“Not until we know for certain that theirs is just as solid.”

"I will not lie," Knight said.

"No one said lie," Alderman Brown said. "I think Alderman Brock is merely suggesting we not trust those of untrue faith so easily."

Knight turned away from the Aldermen and back to the radio. "Forgive us," He said after flipping the mute off. "There is much to discuss."

"We agree and we understand," Todd replied. "Still, I think that there is common ground for our two colonies."

"I hope so," Knight agreed. "We should continue this discussion face to face, I think."

Kyle leaned against the wall while Knight and the orbiting colonists worked out an agreement for a landing in Samson Bay. It sounded as though there wasn't much to be concerned about, but still Kyle felt uneasy. There was something that had been missed, and he could feel it. The unasked question that let the truth shine out. Repeatedly his intuition had led him to the truth, and now it screamed he was missing something.

#

"Religious fanatics!" Margaret's blond hair bounced as she shook with anger. "Now we're in trouble."

"Having faith doesn't make someone a fanatic," Todd offered.

"Fleeing Earth to live out your perfect God-fearing ways does make you a fanatic, Todd."

"You're right, Margaret," Catherine interrupted. "Anyone who'd travel lights years, giving up all the comforts of home to scramble in the dirt, for some flimsy, discredited idea is a fanatic."

"Seclusion is different, Catherine, I would have thought you understood that! All we want is to be left alone. Religious types never want to leave people alone. It's against their nature." Margaret stalked back and forth on one side of the conference room while the rest of the council remained seated at the table.

"Seems to me they wanted to be left alone." Herb kicked up his large feet the table. "No one out here to boss around except their own kind."

"Fine, don't listen to me." Margaret threw up her hands in frustration.

"I'd be willing to listen to you, Margaret," Daniel offered. "If I knew what it was you were trying to say."

"I'm saying you can't trust them! Is that so hard to hear?" Exasperated, Margaret leaned against the wall. "Just don't accept everything they say at face value."

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Todd said. “But there is a difference between cautious and suspicious.”

“Just what is it you think they are going to do? Throw bibles at us up here in orbit?” Oliver interjected. “Your theories of a paranoid military cult are gone, now we have to hear you rant about the dangers of religion?”

“Okay, I was off-base with that analysis, but the facts supported it. I’m not wrong about the politics of the situation. These little darlings could steal the planet right out from under us.” Margaret looked around the conference room, locking eyes for a moment with each member of the Governing Council.

“The next question, I suppose,” she said. “Is, who’s going down on the first trip?”

“Just a few people,” Todd suggested. “Relevant experts to ask the right questions so we can come to an agreement that’s beneficial to both sides.”

“You’re the politician,” Herb said. “You do the talking for us.”

“I don’t know if I’ve been complimented or insulted,” Todd replied.

“Depends on the deal you cut.” Herb laughed and sat back in his chair.

“Right,” Todd turned to the rest of the Governing Council. “Oliver, we’ll need you for farming and ecological questions. Edward, do you want to fly us down or have one of your relief pilots do it?”

“It would make more sense to have a reserve pilot do the duty,” Daniel suggested.

“Yeah, but I like the idea of being the first man down,” Edward turned to Todd. “I’ll give you a ride.”

“Daniel,” Todd added. “You’ve got more experience with alien worlds than the rest of the Council combined. So, are you game?”

“You know you can count on me,” Daniel replied.

“You never know,” Todd relied mysteriously.

“Any objections to just us four?” Todd looked over each member of the Council and it seemed, to Daniel, that Todd paused a bit on Catherine’s face before continuing.

“Then it’s settled. Let’s move, people, we have a lot of work to do.”

#

“Let’s designate this lake as our first alternate.” Daniel pointed to a lake sixty-some odd kilometers inland from Havilah.

“Kind of far for an alternate landing, don’t you think?” Edward asked.

“You want to try putting the shuttle down on that river?” Daniel pointed to the river feeding from the south through Havilah and emptying into Horsehead bay.

“It has the advantage of being closer.” Edward sighed as he looked at the map. “but I’d only land there if there were no other choices.”

“My point entirely. We shouldn’t worry too much about it; the soundings and images from the bay indicate a nicely sheltered landing for us. No storms moving in, so we should be fine.”

Daniel looked up as the hatch to the compartment opened. Todd stepped through, his brown hair a tangled mess; clearly, he was running on a ballistic course.

“Edward, Daniel, are we ready for tomorrow’s landing?” Todd slumped heavily into a seat, seeming to find even the one-third gee of the Independence too much to bear.

“Yeah, Todd,” Daniel said. He touched the save command on the console and then switched it off. “We were really just down to the ‘what if’ planning.”

“Great.” Todd’s eyes were unfocused, as though he were trying to see Seclusion through the hull of the ship.

“When was the last time you slept?” Edward asked moving next to Todd.

“Oh,” Todd swept his hand through the air. “I’m sure it was sometime in this lifetime. I just can’t pin it down.”

“Let’s get you to bed.” Daniel moved forward, but Todd jerked his arm back as Daniel tried to take him by the elbow.

“I’m fine!” For a moment it looked as if Todd were going to hit Daniel, then the exhaustion returned and Todd slumped back into the seat.

“Edward,” Todd said, “can you give me and Daniel a few? Anyway, I’m sure Margaret’s missing you.”

Daniel nodded when Edward looked over to him. Something was wrong, dreadfully wrong, and Daniel had a sinking feeling he knew exactly what it was.

The seconds dragged out, as if dilating, while Edward said his goodbyes and left the compartment.

“How long have you been sleeping with Catherine?”

Yeah, it was the moment Daniel had been thinking about – and dreading -- for weeks.

“How long have you known?” Daniel managed to say.

“Since that expression crossed your face a second ago.” Todd stood up, but leaned heavily on the chair he just vacated.

“Todd, this isn’t what...”

“Shut the hell up, Danny-boy!” Todd jumped up, sending his chair across the room. “I really didn’t come here to listen to you apologize or explain. I just needed to confirm it.”

Todd turned and started for the hatch, Daniel reached out and grabbed him by the arm.

“Please, Todd, listen to me.” Todd jerked his arm away. Daniel didn’t try to keep it captive.

“I don’t want to listen to you, Daniel! I trusted you!” Todd turned and stalked forward towards Daniel, forcing Daniel to retreat until his back pressed against the cool metal of the bulkhead. “We’ve been friends for almost twenty years; this is the last thing I expected from you!”

“It isn’t what I wanted, Todd...”

“Don’t give me that bullshit!” Todd spun away from Daniel and leaned heavily against the console where Daniel and Edward had been working. “You knew what you were doing. Don’t make excuses.”

Daniel fell silent. Todd was right of course; no one forced him into a damn thing. He should have been stronger, for Todd and Catherine.

“Any woman among us would love to be with you, Daniel. Why did you have to chase my Catherine?” Todd had started to cry. Not loudly, but softly, which made it all the more painful for Daniel to hear.

Daniel wanted to tell Todd the truth, that it was Catherine who had done the chasing, but the words wouldn’t come. It was better for Todd to hate him than to direct any of it at Catherine.

“What about Catherine?” Daniel asked, his voice just above a whisper.

“I’ll deal with that.” There was an edge of steel to Todd’s voice. “You just stay away from her. You can find someone else.”

Todd straightened and marched out of the compartment, never looking back.

#

The internal shuttle bay was nearly weightless. It did not lie precisely on the centerline of the Independence so there was a slight centripetal effect, gently pulling objects and people to the far bulkhead, but for all effective purposes microgravity ruled in the compartment.

The contact team floated outside the hatch to shuttle number one. Daniel looked to Catherine floating near Todd at the far end of the compartment. She smiled and clumsily hugged her husband, the two of them losing purchase for a moment and floating free from Todd’s handhold on the bulkhead. She didn’t have the look of a woman who had been up all night crying.

“Something wrong, Danny?” Herb’s voice startled Daniel back to the matters at hand.

“No,” he lied. “Just mulling over possibilities.”

“Don’t have puppies, it’s going to work out fine.” Herb grabbed a handhold and rotated himself into Daniel’s plane. “Most people are willing to listen to reason, and to have done so well on their own, I think they must be reasonable people.”

“I hope you’re right.” Daniel turned as the sound of the hatch to the compartment opening. “And even if they aren’t, a planet is big enough to share.”

“Daniell!” Aileen’s voice bounced off the hard metal bulkheads of the compartment as she flew into the room. She tried to launch herself directly to Daniel, but she fumbled her kick and tumbled head over feet, as her trajectory threatened to impact the bulkhead next to Daniel.

Steadying himself with a handhold, Daniel reached out and caught Aileen by one flailing ankle with the practiced ease of someone who had trained many green spacers in zero-gee movement.

“I wanted to wish you luck.” Aileen said, her head angled more to Daniel’s waist than his face. Daniel gave the ankle he gripped a shove and caught Aileen as she rotated into his plane of orientation.

“Thanks,” he said, “but you shouldn’t come to the weightless areas of the ship if you haven’t had the training.”

Daniel slid his hand down Aileen’s arm until he was holding her by the hand, then he guided her hand to a handhold on the bulkhead and released it.

“Well, I wanted to do it, so I did.” Aileen challenged Daniel with her eyes. “And I’m going to give you a kiss for luck too.”

Aileen grabbed Daniel by the collar of his jumpsuit and pulled herself to him. Just as her lips were about to contact his, she turned her head and kissed him on the cheek. Then she shoved him away, nearly rotating herself free from her handhold in the process.

“Careful,” Edward said as he and Margaret entered the compartment. “You can give your wrist an awful twist that way.”

Across the compartment, Daniel saw Todd had watched the proceedings with acute interest. Damn the girl! No doubt Todd was starting to wonder just how much of the colony Daniel was bedding.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” Todd announced as he separated from Catherine and came over to the hatch.

“Come on, Aileen” Catherine said, floating up next to the pair. “Let’s get you back somewhere both us can keep our breakfasts down.”

Catherine guided Aileen across the weightless compartment. Catherine made sure Aileen exited first, and then while Daniel was watching, and Todd was not, she blew a kiss to Daniel.

Edward spun the handle on the hatch to the shuttle and pulled it opened. Margaret, with the practiced ease of a woman who has lived in microgravity as much as in full gravity, pulled Edward towards her and kissed her husband good-bye.

“You be careful,” she whispered.

“Nothing’s going to go wrong,” Edward assured her.

“You’re sweet. Naive, but sweet.” Margaret kissed Edward again, then quickly turned herself around, kicked off the bulkhead and shot out of the compartment. Edward sighed, watching the blond missile that was his wife, then he turned and moved into the shuttle’s airlock.

Daniel followed Edward, giving Edward enough room to open the inner hatch a meter and half along the airlock. Two more matching hatches for the shuttle’s airlock, and they were inside the passenger compartment of the shuttle.

“Stow all your breakables, and please don’t pester the crew,” Edward tossed over his shoulder as he and Daniel proceeded forward to the cockpit. Behind them, the rest of the contact team followed the piloting crew into the cockpit.

Daniel double-checked the preflight that he and Edward had given the shuttle an hour earlier -- the bird was ready to fly.

The mechanics of flying the shuttle were engrossing enough to take Daniel’s thought away from betrayal and his own consuming weakness. It wasn’t until they had finished the burn to bring the shuttle into their new orbital inclination that Daniel found his mind turning to less pressing matters.

“Okay, people,” Edward announced. “We’re secured from acceleration for the next twenty minutes. Then it’s our de-orbit burn and meeting our new neighbors.”

Daniel peered at Seclusion on the PEM-generated screen in the bulkhead ahead of him. The oceans were as blue as Earth’s, but the land, aside from the blistering white of the polar caps, was a startling contrast to their home planet.

Where greens and browns dominated Earth, Seclusion was a riot of reds, oranges, and amber colors. It was, Daniel had to admit to himself, the most colorful planet he had ever seen.

“She’s beautiful isn’t she?” Edward said following Daniel’s gaze out to the planet.

“Indeed she is.”

“Who are you talking about?” Todd asked from his seat behind Daniel’s co-pilot position.

“Our new mistress,” Edward replied jauntily. “Seclusion.”

“Ah, I thought perhaps a certain someone had been on Daniel’s mind.”

“Yeah, what’s the story with Aileen?” Edward turned from the window and looked at Daniel.

“Nothing to tell,” Daniel replied. “She’s got a crush, that’s all it is.”

“Don’t you listen to him,” Todd jerked his head towards Daniel. “Explorers are notorious casanovas.”

“So are pilots.” Edward laughed as he spoke. “But if I stepped out of line Margaret would gut me.”

“Todd,” Daniel interrupted, “Give me a hand back aft? We’re short handed this flight.”

“Of course,” Todd answered mechanically as he unstrapped and followed Daniel into the vast passenger compartment.

“You didn’t tell her you knew,” Daniel said flatly.

“No, I didn’t, not that it is any of your business.”

“It is my business, ‘cause it was my foul-up.” Daniel gripped a handhold and spun himself to look at Todd straight on.

“But I don’t need that crap about casanovas,” Daniel continued, aware that there was more anger to his voice than he had intended to reveal. “You know it’s not true.”

“Mr. Diego,” Todd’s voice was level and cold. “I haven’t an idea in hell what’s true with you anymore.”

“Bull!” Daniel tried to keep from getting angry, but he could feel control slipping away. “You’ve known me almost twenty years...”

“And for all I know you’ve been screwing Catherine since before we got married!” Todd slammed a fist against the equipment locker, barely catching himself as he started to rotate.

“That’s stupid, and you know it!” Daniel took in a deep breath, wishing he could find some way out of the mess he had gotten himself into.

“When did it start?”

“Does that really matter right now?” Daniel asked.

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of something for a change, Daniel? Now, when did this affair get started?” Todd’s eye narrowed to just slits.

Daniel closed his eyes and thought about the hearings where Senator Kellenburg nearly revoked Seclusion's charter.

“On Catherine’s final survival checkout.” He didn’t open his eyes to see Todd’s reaction. Deep in his heart he wondered if he would ever open his eyes again.

“Christ!” He heard Todd exclaim.

“Todd, I’m sorry...” Daniel opened his eyes, but Todd already had reached the hatch to the cockpit.

“Betraying our friendship wasn’t enough? You had to endanger the colony as well?” Todd spun the wheel on the hatch, but didn’t pull it open. Do your job,” he added, “but beyond that, I don’t care what happens to you.”

Todd pulled the hatch open, forcing Daniel to either broadcast his reply to the rest of the team, or be silent. Daniel chose silence.

A few moments later Edward came from cockpit, a look of concern tight on his face.

“Todd looked mightily pissed about something,” he said.

“Yeah, we don’t always see eye-to-eye,” Daniel said as noncommittally as he could.

“Who does?” Edward looked around the passenger compartment. Daniel was painfully aware that there was nothing in there that he could even remotely pretend he had needed Todd’s help with.

“Not going to tell me what it was about?” Edward asked.

“No.”

“Fair enough.” Edward rotated himself back towards the cockpit. “We’ve got a shuttle to land, anyway.”

Chapter 11

"We're going to keep the number of people on the beach very small," Alderman Brock said.

"Yes, sir," Jacob replied.

"I want you and all the Watchmen there, and the Aldermen will be there, of course." Alderman Brock unrolled a map of Samson Bay.

"We'll wait for them here." He pointed to a section of beach at the north end of the bay.

"Why there?" Jacob asked.

"It's well away from our fishing fleet and there's no direct access to Havilah." Alderman Brock looked up into Jacob's face.

"Don't worry too much," he advised. "I'm sure it's going to go fine."

"Sir," Jacob replied. "If you worry, I'm going to worry. You've been right too many times."

"I don't know about that, but odds are everything will be fine. Remember, if we're too jittery we could cause things to get out of hand, even if they're going well. A good Watchman is a steady Watchman."

"Yes, sir."

"Alderman Knight also thinks it would be a good idea to have some of the scouts out in their uniforms. I don't think it could hurt."

“A couple of scouts from each dorm? That would add more than a couple of dozen people,” Jacob suggested.

“That brings us to about fifty.” Brock looked up from his office, out the window at Samson Bay. “Let’s keep it at that.”

“I have a question,” Jacob said.

“Go ahead.”

“If something goes wrong,” Jacob started, his voice cracking. “What are the Watchmen supposed to do? These aren’t beasts landing today, it’s people.”

“You’ve had to use your shock club once or twice,” Brock answered.

“Yeah, to get someone’s attention, but we understand that violence is wrong. Do they? What if they don’t respect the club?” Jacob started tapping the side of his legs with his forefingers.

“We’ll worry about that if it happens,” Brock said. “Frankly, that they are coming down to talk is a very good sign. Even to a cynic like me.”

Brock crossed from his desk to the window and looked up into the blue sky. The red sun hung low in the east, for the morning had barely begun.

“If they wanted violence it would very easy for them. We’re as helpless as a babe. They know it, and we know it. So if they’re willing to talk, then it can’t be that bad, can it?”

“No, sir. I guess not.”

#

The scout uniform was hot and terribly uncomfortable, but Jacob wasn’t about to loosen his neckerchiefs. He had pride in himself and his troop, and today he would look his best. Even if he melted while doing it.

To his left and right stood the other scouts representing their dormitories. It pleased Jacob to see that everyone was maintaining Havilah’s high standards of a scout.

The hard crystalline sand crunched beneath his boots as Jacob shifted his weight back and forth. It was important to not to lock your knees, or you’d find yourself passed out and face down before you knew it.

Suddenly, the crowd reacted; Jacob and Brian turned their attention to the sky.

“There it is!”

Jacob followed where Brian pointed, and at first he saw nothing, then there it was. A flash of silver, gleaming in the sky.

It quickly grew from a dot, into a delta-winged shuttle, the hull mirrored and bright.

"Looks like they're on air-breathing engines," Brian commented. "Dropped below the sound-barrier out over the ocean. That was neighborly of them."

The shuttle approached quickly, startling Jacob with its swiftness. Brian bragged about the Redemption's speed, though he had flown it only in the simulated runs, but watching a shuttle tear across the sky like a beast in pursuit was impressive -- and frightening.

#

"There they are." Edward pointed on the screen, and a cursor obediently indicated the settlement on the coast.

The shuttle was speeding west, approaching Havilah from the ocean. Dropping the effects of both the sonic booms and reactants from the fusion drive safely from the settlers.

"Let's do a couple of passes, then if everything still looks good, land in the bay." Daniel traced out a flight plan on the map in front of him: go inland, then make a north-to-south pass, then go back for landing.

"Looks good to me," Edward agreed. "Everyone else okay with that?"

"Looks fine." Todd's voice sounded normal to Daniel's ear. At least for the moment, it would be all business between them.

"All right then, make cameras as you need 'em, we have processing power to spare now that the fusion plant is off-line." Edward transmuted a section of the bulkheads surface into more displays, repeating everyone's feed on his control panel as well.

The coast came and went quickly as the shuttle passed over the colony. At four-hundred kilometers per hour, the landscape was visible, but details blurred away.

"I don't see any fighter squadrons or big guns," Oliver commented, his voice a textbook example of sarcasm.

"I do see a big burn to the north." Daniel trained one of the PEM cameras on a blackened spot north and west of Havilah. It resisted magnification, appearing only as a burnt-out clearing in the autumn colored forest.

"Could be a natural forest fire," Oliver suggested. "Not uncommon for a deciduous forest."

"It's at the same location as that mass of rifle fire," Margaret's voice cut in from the Independence. "That's too much of a coincidence."

"Why didn't we see this earlier?" Todd asked.

“Cloud cover,” Daniel answered. “The sea-breeze effect kept the colony itself clear enough for us, but this was under clouds until today. Sorry, our sensors weren’t designed for cloud penetrating surveillance work.”

“No call to apologize for that,” Todd replied.

Not when there are other things to apologize for. Daniel knew what Todd was saying, even when he didn’t speak it.

“Well, that’s not the whole town out to welcome us,” Edward pulled one of the cameras over to the crowd waiting at the shore of Horsehead Bay.

Daniel’s thoughts returned to Catherine. Beauty didn’t cause him to be so weak. Catherine was attractive, but far more physically impressive women had thrown themselves at Daniel after his return. Lately, he thought it might have been love, but now in the cold light of discovery he knew he loved Catherine, but not in the way he had assumed. Was it that she understood him and he needed to be understood, or was it that he was hiding, or that they were both hiding?

“Daniel?” Edward asked, forcing Daniel’s thoughts back to the important issue of landing. “We go ahead?”

“I don’t see anything to cause an abort.” Daniel scanned the view screens again. A sea of faces looked up, the faces white against a green beach. “Anyone else see anything?”

There were several moments of silence.

“Land us.” Todd ordered.

“Anyone see anything interesting?” Todd asked.

“Right now, no.” Margaret replied on the open channel. A display swelled into existence, mirroring Margaret’s back on the Independence. Seclusion’s only continent neatly filled the display.

“Blue oceans,” she said. “That’s pretty much the same as Earth.”

“But the beaches are green.” Oliver offered. He too had created a screen in the PEM surface of the bulkhead; in fact, he had four screens open.

“Chromium,” Margaret replied.

“Our beaches are emeralds?” Todd asked.

“Hardly,” An emerald green beach was magnified until it filled the display. “It looks like it, but the probe reported pretty much silica sands, just with a high chromium contamination.”

“Still, it’s pretty.” Todd’s voice was weak and distracted.

“Have you considered where we will settle Seclusion, now?” Oliver asked.

“Well,” Todd said slowly, drawing out each word. “We’ll have to consider things. Consult with our exploration expert. All of our plans were centered on Horsehead Bay as our primary location.”

“Shame we can’t relocate them.” Margaret’s repeater display switched to focus on the squatter colony.

“This is their home, Margaret.” Oliver said. “We don’t have the right to kick them out of it.”

“Worse yet,” she replied. “We don’t have the money.”

“Eleven thousand of them.” Daniel heard her mutter. “Our best hope is that they still care about privacy.”

“There’s a good chance of it.” Todd said. “They left Earth just as the League and the Voyeur society was getting started. They probably don’t like being spied on anymore than we do.”

The shuttle shot over the settlement, quickly passing over the fortress wall encircling it to the west, replacing the view with the wilds of Seclusion.

“Looks fairly normal.” Todd had duplicated Margaret’s displays on his own.

Daniel stared at Margaret’s display. The buildings weren’t exceptional. The ones made from the wood-analogues were pale, looking like white pine. The concrete ones had a greenish tint to them, no doubt from the sands and that chromium contamination.

Between the buildings walked the squatters themselves. The shuttle’s video processors display upturned faces, frozen in time, as they had flown over the settlement. It all looked perfectly ordinary.

So what was wrong with this picture?

#

“Where are they going?” Jacob asked as the shuttle vanished inland.

“Probably to take a good look at the lay of the land,” Brian offered. “They’ll be back. That’s a water-lander like ours, and unless the pilot is insane, he’ll put it down in the bay.”

True to Brian’s prediction, the shuttle reappeared, this time from the south, running the length of the bay before vanishing off to the north.

“Doesn’t look all that different from ours.” Brian strained to watch the shuttle as it turned east, out to sea. “I bet you I could fly it.”

“It was pretty loud.” The roar of the engines had been another new experience for Jacob.

“No, it wasn’t. If they had lit off their fusion drive, then it would have been loud and we would have been cooked.” Brian laughed. Jacob

could tell by the sparkle in Brian's eye that watching a spacecraft -- any spacecraft -- was a dream for his friend.

"Okay, he's making his approach now."

Jacob turned his attention to the spacecraft. It came in from the east more slowly this time, then turned south and lined up along the length of the bay.

As it dropped closer to the water it seemed to slow down, until it just crawled along the length of the bay. Once it touched the water, all illusion of slow, gentle flight vanished as the sea exploded around the shuttle. A rooster-tail of spray arched into the air behind the landing spacecraft. The water flew high into the air above the wake of the shuttle as it plowed through the bay.

Finally, the shuttle came to a stop, steam curling gently from the tail.

"Wow," Brian said softly.

#

In the cockpit, Daniel and Edward shut down and secured the shuttle. The fusion plant had been in safety-mode for more than twenty minutes, but securing the rest of the systems would take another half an hour.

"You're leaving the plant online?" Daniel asked as he watched the indicators for the fusion plant fade into just a ghost of an image on the PEM surface.

"You're the one for emergency preparations. With the plan in standby, I can lift off in less than ten minutes if we need to." Edward drew his index finger across the control surfaces of the cockpit, as his finger passed, the controls faded from sight, leaving the flat neutral gray PEM surface.

"How's the boat coming?" Daniel asked into the comm.

"Just fine." The aural illusion of Todd's voice was so perfect that it sounded as if he were standing in the cockpit with them. Todd's voice was clear enough for Daniel to be aware that Todd wasn't 'just fine'. Damn this was screwed up.

#

Jacob stood next to Brian and watched as the small boat sped across the waters of Samson bay. Spray splashed up from the bow and the craft plowed through the surf.

"Here they come," Brian said.

The Aldermen moved down to the edge of the surf to greet the arriving guests as Jacob nodded to the scouts and Watchmen to stand straight and look sharp.

Silence fell across the shore as the boat ran ashore and the people inside started to climb out.

Jacob felt his stomach drop as the big black man stood on the green beach. The one next to him wasn't white, but he wasn't black either. Jacob barely registered that two other men had also climbed out of the craft.

"Niggers," Jacob said softly under his voice.

CHAPTER 12

Silence, broken only by their own footsteps, followed Jacob and the others as they moved through the dusty streets of Havilah. The Aldermen walked ahead of the mud-people while the Watchmen followed behind.

Jacob tried to keep an eye on the buildings and side streets, but found his attention continually drawn back to the Daniel, the big black brute of the landing party. Daniel simultaneously looked less demonic and yet more frightening than Jacob had imagined a nigger looking.

It was clear the rest of Havilah felt the same way. The streets were deserted, and even the windows shutters were drawn closed. The sons of Cain had come to Havilah; this could only end badly.

How many more were up there, Jacob wondered. Jacob didn't doubt that they were armed with more than shock-clubs either. Mud-people followed the way of Cain, violence against people not only was allowed; it was expected. Jacob stole a glance to the blue sky, wondering if soon death would fall like rain.

#

Mud-people! Kyle Brock cursed himself for not even considering of this possibility. Of course, this changed everything. The idea of thousands of murderous, violent sub-humans landing on Havilah simply could not be considered.

Kyle cast a sideways glance at the rest of the Alderman as they took their seats behind the dais. The faces he saw were pale and ashen. The implications of mud-people on Havilah were missed by no one.

"I'm most disappointed that you did not mention the make-up of your colony," Alderman Knight said from the center of the dais.

"It's not an issue to us," Todd Moss replied.

Christ, things must be terrible on Earth. Kyle tapped his fingers on the dais as his mind tried to come to grips with the sudden change of events.

Kyle let one part of his mind follow the back and forth between Knight and the outsiders, while another part started planning and considering options and possible futures.

Clearly what passed as faith on Earth now was nothing like what the Founders had brought to Havilah. Kyle had no doubts that strong passionate faith had been eliminated in the camps and mind-altering treatments his fathers had fled two hundred years before. Of course, faith no longer carried him as it had when Kyle had been a young man, but that wasn't the point. As the Alderman charged with security and protection of the flock, it was his duty to keep the people of Havilah safe and free, in body and in mind. He could leave their souls to Chief Alderman Knight.

What sort of danger did these people present? That they were a danger was beyond question, but the kind of danger dictated the best measures to defeat it. No wall to stop the beasts would work here; something more direct was called for.

"Alderman Knight," Todd Moss said sharply, getting Kyle's attention. "We are not a threat!"

"You are a threat," Kyle interjected. "You are the product of a diseased and violent culture. We can't just ignore that."

"We are not violent," The nigger, Daniel, said.

"In my lifetime," Kyle responded. "There has been one murder, can you say the same thing?"

"That's not fair," Oliver shouted.

"It's true," Knight said. "You have turned your back on God and his teachings. Our planet is part of his plan for his people."

Kyle turned back to his thoughts as the debate and negations continued.

Havilah was as exposed as a baby in the forest. From orbit the mud-people commanded the entire situation. Hell, even if the Aldermen agreed in launching the Redemption, the colony's shuttle wasn't a war craft. There was nothing that it could do. Once they returned to their ship in orbit, these mud-people could just exterminate Havilah at their leisure.

As Kyle thought, he listened as well. God, that Todd was a silver-tongued devil. What had started out as a straightforward issue of their deceit had somehow turned into proposals of separate colonies. Knight knew the Bible, but his command of subtle tricks and lies was lacking,

and now he was slowly being boxed into a corner by a skilled and amoral opponent.

“This is going in circles,” Kyle suggested. “And we are all becoming tired and cross. I move we break for a few hours, and let our guests eat and drink as well.”

The give and take continued for several more minutes, then the Aldermen adjourned.

#

“Racists,” Edward spat as he sat at the table in the small room that had been provided for them. “I just can’t believe it.”

“Margaret’s going to have a field day with this,” Oliver said as he paced back and forth.

“The question is, what are we going to do about it?” Todd looked over at Daniel who was busy setting up the communication station for contact with the Independence, then Todd looked back at Oliver.

“There’s no way we can share a planet with them,” Oliver said.

“Oliver’s right about that,” Edward agreed. “You heard them call me and Daniel mud-people. Hell, they were proud of their ignorance.”

“I’ve got the Governing Council,” Daniel reported as he stood up from the communications station. In the middle of the room a reduced scale image of the Council floated in the air.

Daniel noticed that Todd ignore him as the Council was informed of the discovery of the racist nature of the settlers. Daniel offered a comment or two as Todd reported, but Todd rolled past Daniel’s offerings without acknowledgment.

“Damn,” Margaret said after the report was finished. “We should get all of you back on the ship as fast as possible.”

“We haven’t achieved anything yet,” Todd said.

“What do you think you’ll get?” Margaret replied. “Do you think they’ll slap their foreheads and go ‘oh what idiots we’ve been?’”

“Sarcasm won’t get us anywhere,” Herb said. “We deal with them now or we deal with them later. That’s what it comes down to, and frankly now is just as good.”

“I think Margaret’s right,” Catherine said. “It’s stupid to stay down there. Who knows what they are capable of?”

“Despite their idiotic beliefs,” Daniel interjected. “They seem as pacifistic as they claim.”

“Tell that to whatever they were shooting in the woods,” Margaret objected.

“Listen to Margaret,” Oliver said. “Nothing has killed more people than this stupid idea of racism. When the League gets here we need to have the whole lot packed up for treatment.”

“It’s not that simple,” Dr. Wells explained. “Simply being racist isn’t enough to compel treatment. They have to be a proven danger to others.”

“You can’t be defending them!” Margaret’s shock was palpable, even through the comm unit.

“I’m not defending them,” Dr. wells said. “I’m telling what the laws are. It’s possible to make almost any mindset a ‘curable’ mindset. We certainly got in enough trouble with that two hundred years ago, but unless they are actively a danger the League will leave them alone. Just as they left us alone.”

“They didn’t leave us alone,” Margaret objected. “And we certainly can’t count on these assholes leaving us alone.”

“This is getting us nowhere,” Herb suggested. “Todd, what are our options and what do you think is the long term outlook here?”

“This is very touchy,” Todd said as he sat on the edge of the table in the center of the room. “We have an alternate landing spot for Seclusion -- that’s not a problem, is it, Daniel?”

“Not from a logistics point of view, but...”

“The real problem,” Todd continued. “Is the League. If Havilah forces this issue, we can’t rule out that they would be given a prior claim on this moon. We’d be stuck either heading home on a League ship or risking another jump in the Independence.”

“You don’t think the League would let a bunch a no-neck idiots have a planet, do you?” Oliver asked.

“They may prefer racists to ‘perverts,’” Margaret offered.

“It’s not likely,” Daniel suggested. “Orphan colonies haven’t been recognized as valid. Only one has been granted a retroactive charter.”

“What’s been done once can be done again,” Margaret said. “We can’t trust this to the League and we can’t trust the squatters. We need to get you back up to orbit where we will control the situation.”

#

“We are in desperate danger,” Kyle informed the rest of the Aldermen.

“Niggers,” Alderman Mercer said. “I never thought they’d be coming here.”

“Clearly they can’t stay,” Knight said. “We’ve got to get them to move on.”

“That might not be so easy,” Alderman Brown suggested. “They know we’ve got a good thing going here. It would be just like mud-people to steal it.”

“And murder us in our beds,” Alderman Clark added. “Our women and children are at their mercy.”

"I wouldn't expect mercy from any of them," Kyle said. "We can't let them return to their ship."

"What are you suggesting, Brock?" Knight asked.

"As long as they are here, we have a shield. Something to keep us from being bombed from orbit." Kyle looked upwards, towards the ceiling of Alderman's Hall, dragging everyone's attention to the real threat.

"Once they get back to their ship they can bomb us out of existence, and then take whatever is left," Kyle continued. "We can't let them get back up there. Not until we have figured out a way out of this."

"We extended an invitation," Knight said. "It would be deceitful to cross that."

"They were deceitful when they didn't tell us they had niggers on board!" Alderman Mercer's cheeks flushed red with anger.

"We didn't lie to them," Kyle said more softly than Mercer's outburst. "They misled and lied to us."

"Violence harms the soul that creates it, brother. We must not sacrifice that."

"I'm not suggesting we do," Kyle countered. "We can put them under lock and key without violence. But if we don't, worse things than bombardment can happen to us. Our souls are in danger." He felt like a liar, playing this card, but Knight would never answer to a strictly practical argument.

"Our souls can only be in danger if we fail in the Lord's commandments," Knight replied.

"The danger isn't just these mud-people and their allies," Kyle explained. "If they turn us over to their government, we will be shipped back to Earth and brainwashed. Forget about singing the Lord's praises, we'll be worshipping the state."

Kyle could feel the panic take hold of the other Aldermen. Many stories from the Founders had been passed down about the persecution of Christians on Earth, a nightmare that the Founders had barely escaped. Now it had come to them.

"We will not resort to violence," Knight ordered once he had quieted the rest of the aldermen.

"No one is suggesting violence," Kyle insisted. "But we can not trust our lives or our souls to the goodwill of these niggers and their helpers."

"Alderman Brock is right," Mercer said. "We don't have to be violent, but we have to protect ourselves. Just as if they were beasts."

The other Aldermen joined in the argument, but Kyle was no longer worried. He could feel the mood of the other Aldermen beginning to shift. The niggers wouldn't be getting back to their ship until he knew how to handle this situation.

#

The situation took a drastic turn for the worst as eight young men, armed with ugly metal-edged clubs, entered the room.

"Please come with us," The lead young man said.

"What's going on?" Todd asked.

"The Aldermen want you moved. Please don't resist." The young man indicated the door with his club.

"Screw that!" Oliver shouted. "We not taking orders from a bunch..."

The young man moved forward and touched Oliver with the tip of the club. Oliver instantly convulsed and fell to the floor. Todd and Edward moved in quickly, but also fell as the club hit them. Daniel joined in the resistance even though he knew it was useless, before he felt the touch and shock of the club, and then there was nothing at all.

#

"Here," Aldermen Brock said as he offered a glass of strong beer to Jacob. "Drink this."

"Umm" Jacob knew that the beer was restricted to married men, but he also knew that it was one of the things most often smuggled into the dorms, and as often overlooked.

"It's all right," Alderman Brock assured Jacob. "I was young once and I know you've already got your feet wet on this."

His hands shaking, Jacob reached out and took the glass. The warm powerful drink hit his stomach and he felt himself starting to relax.

"This is something new for all of us," Alderman Brock said.

"It wasn't all that bad," Russell said. Russell's voice held none of the anxiety that Jacob felt. Jacob looked up from his seat to Russell at the back of Alderman Brock's office. Russell was a good head taller than Jacob, well over six feet tall, with light blonde hair falling across his eyes, that seemed to perpetually hide his intent. Though he had been married for a year now, Russell continued to be Watchman while he searched for his permanent place in Havilah, and continued to lobby the Aldermen to make Watchman a permanent position.

"It's only just beginning," Alderman Brock said. "We have a crisis on our hands which if we don't handle it right will cost us everything."

"What do we do now?" Jacob asked, turning his attention back to his superior.

“Get rid of the niggers and the nigger-lovers,” Russell said firmly.

“And when a ship comes looking to check up on them?” Brock asked. “What do we do then?” He stood from his desk and shook his head.

“We need to proceed very carefully. I don’t think there are going to be any easy answers, Watchman Clark.” Brock took Russell by the shoulder and eased him out of the office.

“He enjoys being a Watchman too much,” Jacob said after Russell was out of the office.

“That’s why even though he’s older, I trust you to run the Watchmen,” Brock returned to his seat behind his desk. “To be a good Watchman requires a subtlety I don’t think Russell will ever have.”

“But what do we do now?” Jacob put the half-emptied glass of beer on the desk and sat back in his chair. “We can’t expect them to act reasonable. They’ve already shown us that much.”

“It’s up to the Aldermen, of course,” Brock replied. “As I see it, we’ve got three things right in front of us. We have to learn about them and what are they going to do to get Havilah away from us, we have to learn about their colony ship and what it can do, and we have to learn about their shuttle. Maybe we can fly it ourselves.”

Brock stood up again. Jacob couldn’t remember a time when Alderman Brock had been so filled with nervous energy.

“Chief Alderman Knight is going to keep trying to make our guests see reason -- that they have to move on and settle somewhere else, but while he’s doing that, we have to be ready if he fails.”

“How are we going to do that?” Jacob asked.

“First, we have to keep things quiet,” Brock said. “You report straight to me on this matter and no one else. I’ll keep the rest of the Aldermen informed. Second, we start learning everything we can about that shuttle of theirs. Have Brian see if he can work out how to operate it.”

“How about the Harvest Dance?” Jacob asked. God blessed Havilah with a year-round growing season, creating multiple harvests for the people to celebrate and give thanks for his mercy. Each celebration was looked forward to almost as much as Christmas.

“No reason to cancel that,” Brock answered. “Everyone has worked hard and earned their party. We’re not going to let a bunch of mud-people change that.”

#

“What the hell happened?” Oliver asked as he came to. Daniel reached down and helped Oliver up into a sitting position.

"Looks like we're not guests anymore," Edward chipped in from his spot next to Oliver.

"Prisoners," Todd said, his voice weak and his shoulders stooped.

"That pretty much covers it," Daniel agreed. Daniel stood and looked around the small cell. There were two beds and a simple toilet, beyond that the cell was bare. A simple window of reinforced glass let in the last dying rays of the red sun as it set.

"Well, Margaret's going to get a chance to say 'I told you so' when we get back," Oliver started to get up, but groaned and fell back to the floor.

"Take it easy," Daniel said, well aware of his own pain radiating from the burn on his chest.

"What did they hit me with?" Oliver asked.

"A shock device of some kind," Daniel answered. "Your muscles are going to be sore for a couple of days, I'd guess. Mine hurt like hell."

"We're in some serious trouble," Edward said.

"What do we do about it?" Oliver asked.

"Prayer wouldn't be a bad idea," Daniel suggested.

"You pray?" A voice said from the reinforced window.

Daniel looked up to the window and saw the face of a young boy, no more than eight, swaying unsteadily at the lower edge of the frame.

"Yes, I do." Daniel said, not mentioning the subject of his last sincere prayer had been for a good friend to stop screaming.

"But you're a nigger," The boy said. Clearly a devout black man didn't fit into the theology around here.

"Can't a sub-Saharan descendant pray?" Daniel asked.

"I don't know what one of those is, but niggers got the mark of Cain, so you're going to hell."

The face vanished suddenly as whatever supported the young boy collapsed. Daniel could hear an adult of some variety chasing off the children.

"That didn't sound too good," Edward said.

"You still didn't say what we do about this," Oliver's voice cracked slightly as he spoke.

"Play for time, hope we get a chance to escape," Daniel answered.

"How about rescue? They've got to know something's gone wrong, up there?" Oliver said.

"I wouldn't count on it," Daniel said. "We don't have the trained personnel or the equipment for a rescue mission. They'd just as likely get us killed as save us."

Daniel dropped heavily to the floor of the cell.

"We're on our own."

Chapter 13

Jacob closed his eyes and enjoyed the sea breeze sweeping across his face. He rarely got offshore, and this trip to the shuttle was a rare treat. Jacob nodded and smiled to Patrick riding in the boat with him. Patrick looked toward the shuttle and waved to his fellow Watchman standing guard on its deck.

Watchmen used to guard against beasts, but now they were guarding against whom?

The small boat pulled along side, and Jacob scrambled up the ladder along the hull of the shuttle until he was on the top platform; behind him, Patrick followed suit.

“Going to see Brian,” Jacob explained as he climbed down into the spaceship.

Below the airlock was a large, mostly empty room, occupied by a few tables with seats affixed to the deck. Brian sat back in one of the seats, his legs kicked up on the table, eyes closed.

“Wake up!” Jacob shouted as he dropped the last few feet from the airlock.

Brian lazily opened one eye and looked at Jacob.

“I’m working,” he replied.

“At what? Checking for light leaks?” Jacob joined Brian at the table and took a seat next to Brian.

“Trying to figure this ship out,” Brian waved about the room with one hand while sitting up in the seat.

“They have control systems that are like nothing we have.” Brian pointed to the brightly glowing strip that ran down the middle of the room.

“Lighting, good idea, every place needs some.” He leaned towards Jacob. “But how do you turn it off? On? Up or down? I can’t find a switch, or panel, or anything that looks like a control.”

“Voice?” Jacob suggested, aware that Brian must have already tried it.

“If so, it doesn’t listen to strangers.” Brian stood and moved forward. He gestured for Jacob to follow him.

“Oh,” Brian said sarcastically as he opened the hatch, “Normal hatches. Spin the dogs to open or close it. That much I can figure out.”

Jacob followed Brian into the next room. It looked much like the cockpit of the Redemption, except where the controls were in the Redemption, there was only gray metal, smooth and devoid of markings.

“No controls at all that I can find!” Brian turned around pointing to the various surfaces of the cockpit.

“Not one lighted panel, touch-screen, or holographic interface.”

Brian dropped into the pilot’s seat, if that was what it was.

“I can understand not having windows; that makes sense, every break in the hull weakens it. But, where are their screens or holographic displays? How do they steer the damned thing?”

“Don’t curse,” Jacob advised.

“Sorry,” Brian said, and Jacob could see that he truly was. “But this is vexing me. Alderman Brock will want to know when I will be able to fly the thing. Ha! So far, all I can tell him is that it has a fusion plant that’s in standby. Whoopee!”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“No, I won’t,” Brian admitted. “Not without their help. It just isn’t going to happen, Jacob. This is their ship, and they are the only ones who can fly it.”

Jacob and Brian spent the rest of the afternoon going over the shuttle from nose to tail, trying in vain to figure out the control system.

Hours later found them no closer to understanding the shuttle.

“These readouts seems to be real enough and they’re working,” Jacob offered.

The two young men were standing in what they guessed to be the engineering compartment of the shuttle. They had come to this, as Brian had put it, ‘brilliant’ conclusion due to the fact that this was the only compartment with any sort of read-outs or displays.

“Yeah, but there are no read-outs there.” Brian stepped up to the bulkhead that Jacob was inspecting.

“See,” Brian ran his hand across one of the displays. “It’s perfectly flat -- that read-out is part of the wall. Whatever they coat the wall in, is making that display.”

Brian slid his finger along the wall, looking at the walls, floor, and ceiling as he spoke.

“It’s everywhere. It must be some sort of paintable electronics, but I’ll never crack how to work it.” Brian turned and stalked back into the main compartment.

“Why can’t I bring Folkes and Sykes in on this?” he asked. “Maybe they’ll spot something I’m missing.”

“Alderman Brock says we have to keep this quiet for now.” Jacob sat in one of the passenger seats in the wide main compartment.

“Secrecy is just a step away from lying,” Brian said as he sat down as well.

“I’m usually the one to quote Alderman Knight’s sermons,” Jacob observed. “You’re just frustrated.”

“I’m scared too,” Brian admitted. “I’m not going to figure this out, and from up there they can do anything they want.”

“That scares me too,” Alderman Brock said as he dropped into the compartment from the airlock. The two young men hurriedly brought their attention to the Alderman.

“Sorry, sir,” Brian offered, “I hate to be a quitter.”

“I understand.” Brock walked into the bridge; his hands clasped behind his back. The two young men followed.

“It means we’ll have to find some way to convince them to teach us how to use it.” Brock said as he looked around the cockpit and its smooth featureless panels.

“I don’t think that they will,” Brian said. “I know I wouldn’t if I were in their shoes.”

“Let’s hope Alderman Knight can be persuasive.”

#

“Cut the crap,” Margaret snapped. “They’re not guests, they’re not diplomats, they’re your hostages!”

“We would prefer not to hold anyone,” Alderman Knight’s voice was clear as it was broadcast into the Governing Council’s conference room. “Still, as long as your leader is with us, we can be certain that our safety is assured. That is my mission, granted from God, to keep my people safe.”

“We trusted you,” Catherine said. “You have nothing to fear from us.”

“We have everything to fear,” Knight insisted. “But unlike you, we will honor God’s law and we will continue to work with Mr. Moss to resolve this crisis.”

“Let them go, now.” Margaret slapped the table. “I want to talk to them, I want to talk to my husband, and I want that now!”

“Which is your husband?”

“Edward, but we want to talk to all of them, or so help me...”

Margaret sputtered, words failing her, and collapsed back into her seat.

“See, you resort to violence and threats,” Knight replied. “We never kill and we will not harm your people, but we must be safe.”

“Alderman Knight,” Herb said. “We are as peaceful as you are. This is entirely uncalled for, let our people go and let’s start over.”

“How many niggers and mud-people are there up there?” Knight asked bluntly.

“Good God!” Margaret exclaimed. “Is that the issue? You’re a bunch of racist religious fanatics?”

“Do not blaspheme,” Knight said. “I would not expect you to know the difference between fanaticism and devotion. You send a bull-nigger in our city and expect us to trust you not to attack, not to kill, and not to rape? It is ludicrous.”

“Jesus Christ, God damn, Holy Mother Mary on a dildo!”

Margaret shouted. “I’ll be dead before I listen to a bunch of Nazis!”

“Your people are being treated well,” Knight said, his voice calm in the face of Margaret’s outburst. “But I see you are everything we have feared. For our safety, until this is settled they will stay with us.”

The speakers switched to static as Knight cut off his broadcast. An instant of silence followed.

“That was not helpful, Margaret.” Herb said.

“Not helpful?” Catherine cried out. “Are you trying to get them killed?”

“Shut up,” Margaret said. “I don’t need a lecture from any of you.”

“Go ahead,” Catherine continued. “Say ‘I told you so.’ You know you’ve been dying to.”

“Christ!” Margaret stood up and started stalking over to Catherine’s seat. “Do you think that’s what’s on my mind? I wish to God I had been wrong!”

“Stop it,” Herb said as he stood and intercepted Margaret. “This isn’t doing anyone any good.”

“I’m tired...” Margaret started.

“I’m tired of listening to you,” Elizabeth shouted. “You both can either help solve this problem or shut up and let us do it.”

Margaret stood, Herb still blocking her path. Snorting, she turned and went back to her seat.

“Now,” Elizabeth said. “What can we do about it?”

“Snatch our people back,” Margaret offered.

“I’ll talk to Captain Domingo about it,” Herb said. “But I don’t think we have the people or the training to pull that off.”

“We say whatever we have to,” Catherine suggested. “We make any deal they want, and once we have Todd and the others back, then we can figure out a long term solution.”

“If we make a deal,” Herb said. “The League will hold us to it.”

“Screw the League!” Catherine dropped her head to the top of the table.

“No,” Margaret said. “They’re more likely to screw us. We get Edward and the rest back, then we deal with these Nazis.”

“I propose we let one person deal with the squatters,” Elizabeth suggested. “People yelling threats isn’t going to get us anywhere.”

“Yes, it will,” Margaret said. “Violence is the only thing people like that understand. If they see us as weak, we can kiss all the hostages goodbye.”

“Calm down,” Elizabeth said. “In fact, I think we all need time to calm down. Herb, why don’t we see if Captain Domingo can pull off a rescue mission. Maybe he has resources we aren’t aware of. Anyone object to that?”

Margaret slumped back in her seat, exhausted even though she had risen just three hours earlier.

“Fine,” Margaret replied. “But let’s not wait forever.”

Margaret, marshalling her strength, pushed herself upright and walked out of the Council chambers.

#

“They can’t understand peace,” Alderman Bryant said. “Force and threats are all the sons of Cain understand. We’re wasting our time talking to them.”

Kyle Brock watched as Chief Alderman Knight put his head in his hands. There was a long pregnant pause as the rest of the Aldermen waited for Knight to respond.

“We must try,” Knight said bringing his face. “We have already gone too far for my comfort.”

“If we had let them return to their ship, we might be under attack right now,” Kyle said. “The only thing keeping Havilah safe is their presence in our jail. Make no mistake about that.”

“But we can’t just hold on to them forever,” Alderman Brown complained. “Hester tells me the girls of her dorm are terrified. We have to do something!”

“We are doing something,” Knight insisted. “We will make it clear to them that they can not settle here. In the end that has to be as clear to them as it is to us.”

“That’s never going to work,” Alderman Thompson said. “Once we let them go they can do anything they want. We certainly can’t trust the word of niggers and nigger-lovers.”

“We don’t trust them,” Kyle said. “We have to make sure that they leave.”

“And we’ll do that with kind words and a wave from down here?” Thompson had the sharpest sarcastic sense of any of the Aldermen.

“No, a team will have to go back with the mud-people. We will have the skills to fly their ships, once we understand their control system. We’ll fly them out under our control.”

It was an idiotic plan and Kyle knew it. There were a million ways for it to go wrong, and frankly not one for it to go right. The only realistic option was one that Knight, and most of the other Aldermen who followed him, wouldn’t go for. The only way to keep Havilah safe was to kill the niggers. There really wasn’t a difference between them and beasts; only a soft-hearted person saw one.

“Could that work?” Knight grasped at a non-violent way out of the crisis.

“Possibly,” Kyle lied. “But first we have to learn how to operate their craft, and we have to make them see that this is in their best interest, too.”

“If it doesn’t work, there is another possibility,” Alderman Marshall said. “They could settle the southern hemisphere. There’d be a wide ocean between us.”

“That’s no good,” Alderman Bryant replied. “You know the sons of Cain would attack us. Maybe not this year, maybe not in our lifetime, but war and aggression is their nature. We’d be putting off the murder of ourselves for the murder of our children.”

“Bryant’s right,” Knight agreed. “This is a test the Lord has given to us, not to our children. I will work with them to learn what we need. Alderman Brock, if you could get your plans ready?”

“I’ll be ready,” Kyle said as he sat back into his seat.

#

Daniel watched Todd sleep, on one of the two bunks in the small cell, curled into a fetal position. Currently Edward was sleeping on the other bunk as Daniel and Oliver sat on the floor.

“Are you going to take your turn on the bunk?” Oliver asked as Daniel watched Todd sleep.

“No,” Daniel answered. “Let him sleep. I couldn’t if I wanted to.”

“I saw you sleep a bit earlier,” Oliver replied. “Didn’t last too long though.”

No, it hadn’t. The moment Daniel had drifted off, his mind had taken him back to the *Anson*. It had been quite a struggle not to scream as he jerked awake.

“When I’m tired enough, I’ll sleep,” Daniel said.

“What do you think is going to happen now?” Oliver asked, moving across the small cell and sitting on the floor next to Daniel.

“I don’t know,” Daniel admitted. “**It** depends on how irrational these people really are.”

“They’re bigots,” Oliver said.

“But that doesn’t mean they are stupid. For our sake, and everyone else’s, let’s hope that they aren’t.” Daniel dragged his deep brown hand across the light green concrete of the cell floor. Fanatics could be very clever. The last time it had cost the life of everyone on the *Anson*, except him, of course. This time, if they were too stupid it would only cost his life and those captured with him. If they were only slightly stupid, then everyone on the *Independence* was in danger, and if they had any brains at all, maybe, just maybe, everyone would survive this.

“If they were intelligent, they wouldn’t be racists,” Oliver said.

“You can be bright and bigoted,” Daniel said. “If these are just knuckle-dragging apes, we’re dead. If they can see that their problem is bigger than just Seclusion, we might survive this.”

Daniel stood up and looked out the reinforced window. The red sun was starting to climb into the bright blue sky.

“The League will be here in eight hundred days,” Daniel explained. “If they find no trace of us and these racists living here, well, that will be the end of their little dream world, won’t it?”

“I guess so,” Oliver said. “But it won’t do us any good.”

“My point exactly. We’ve got to make them see, and **I** hope that they are bright enough to see, that in the long run making a deal is their only chance for survival.”

Daniel looked around through the window at the colony. In so many ways it looked just like any of several dozen colonies he had helped start while in the Explorer Corp. The dusty dirt streets, the mixture of high-tech replicated equipment amongst tools and buildings made from native materials. Except for the lack of color in the settlers, Havilah could have been a colony that made the League proud.

The sound of the cell door opening brought Daniel's attention back to the cell. Turning around, he saw six guards, armed with the shock-clubs that Daniel now knew all too well, standing at the door.

"You," said the lead guard, a youth of no more than seventeen Daniel guessed, pointing at Daniel. "Come on out of there."

With a sigh, Daniel moved out of the cell.

"Daniel, don't!" Oliver shouted waking the others.

"Don't be stupid," the lead guard warned.

"Let's hope they're not stupid," Daniel said as the door to the cell closed behind him.

Two of the guards took the front and three followed behind while the youth who led them walked alongside Daniel. It wasn't a very smart arrangement for moving a dangerous prisoner, Daniel noted. A fast, well-trained man could have a hostage before any of the guards moved in. Perhaps these people didn't deal with prisoners often. If so, that could work in the contact team's favor.

If they weren't taking him out to kill him right away, Daniel reminded himself.

They led Daniel from the small jail cell, back through the meeting hall, where just the day before Todd had tried to argue reason into their heads, past the pews in the gallery and out into the not too bright sunlight.

"This way," the youth said pointing left with his shock-club.

"I'm Daniel Diego," Daniel offered. If he saw Daniel as a person, not as a thing, maybe the worst could be avoided. It wasn't much of a card to play, but it was all Daniel had. The young man seemed to consider this before replying.

"Jacob," he said.

"Where are we going?" Daniel asked.

"The radio shack," Jacob answered. "Chief Alderman Knight wants you to speak with the others up in orbit. Let'em know we haven't hurt you."

Daniel felt the pressure lift off of him as if he had switched from a high-gee acceleration to freefall.

"That's a good idea," Daniel said. "We don't want anyone doing anything rash." Daniel didn't add that taking prisoners was already a rash act.

There were a few people on the street as they walked towards the bay, but these few souls quickly moved out of the party's way. Eyes, wide with fear and fascination, followed Daniel as he walked past.

Daniel had felt the stare of bigotry before, even with the advanced psychological treatments that the League possessed. Only when a

person's belief structure made them a danger to others did the Guardian Angel AIs take action and commit a person for treatment. Merely being an ass didn't warrant such action.

The road dropped away from Daniel and presented him with a panoramic view of Horsehead Bay. Bright blue waters, shining green beaches, and floating nearby, almost tauntingly, the shuttle.

"This way," Jacob said, pointing down a southern street.

Daniel followed the guards and soon found himself on the outskirts of what Margaret's briefing had labeled as 'the old city'. Here the buildings were mostly metal, constructed from the hull and bulkheads of the original colony ship. To a small building of this type, they led him.

"Hello," Alderman Knight said as Daniel entered the building. Daniel noticed that the six guards also followed him inside, making the one small room quite cramped.

"Hello," Daniel replied.

"Did he behave himself?" Knight asked Jacob.

"Yeah," Jacob replied. "He may be a nigger, but he can be taught."

"Sub-Saharan Descendant," Daniel said.

Everyone ignore him as Knight turned to the radio operator.

"Do you have the captain of their ship?" Knight asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Come on," Knight to Daniel. "Talk to your people."

"Any lies you want to pass along?" Daniel mocked as he stepped up to the microphone.

"I realize lying is in your nature," Knight said. "But we do not bear false witness, and we don't tell others to do so. Tell the truth if you can."

Daniel snorted and tapped the radio.

"Are you there, Captain Domingo?" he asked.

"Daniel!" Domingo's voice exploded. "Are you alright?"

"For the moment, yeah, we're all okay."

"We've been pretty nervous up here," Domingo replied. "After we learned the kind of bigots we were dealing with, we feared the worst."

"We aren't out of the woods yet, Captain," Daniel looked at the guards crowded into the room with him. "It's still very touch and go here."

"Are they mistreating you?"

"Aside from the capture itself, no," Daniel said. "If they're as peaceful as they claim, we still might be able to cut a deal of some kind."

"I've got Margaret on the line," Domingo said. "Is Edward there?"

“No, but go ahead and put her on.”

“Daniel?” Margaret’s voice was uncharacteristically weak and soft. “Is Eddy okay?”

She had to be rattled if she was calling her husband Eddy in public, Daniel thought.

“Yeah,” Daniel answered. “He’s sleeping right now. So far we’re being treated alright. All things considered.”

“Step back,” Knight ordered Daniel. Daniel shrugged and stepped away from the radio.

“You see,” Knight announced into the radio. “They’re fine. All we’re doing is making sure that my people are going to be safe.”

“There’s no need for this,” Daniel said. “No one is going to attack you.”

“Not while you’re here,” Knight said.

“Daniel? Are you alright?” Margaret asked urgently.

Daniel looked to Knight, who nodded permission back.

“I’m fine,” Daniel replied. “Hopefully we can convince the Aldermen here that not only are we not a threat, but there is no way we can fly to our alternate planet. Like it or not, we’re all neighbors.”

“That’s enough,” Knight ordered. Knight leaned in towards the radio. “We’ll be in contact.” Knight said to Margaret, then switched off the radio.

“Take him back to the jail,” Knight ordered Jacob.

“Alderman Knight,” Daniel shouted as Jacob and the other guards started to lead him away. “Ask Todd about the League inspection. Your people and mine are both at risk.”

Jacob gestured with the shock-club, and Daniel walked out of the radio shack.

Outside, more people were in the streets, but still they kept their distance as Daniel was led back to the jail.

“You have an alternate?” Jacob asked as he marched Daniel down the street.

“It’s standard,” Daniel explained. The more these people understood there was no more hiding, the better his and everyone’s chances were for survival. “Every colony charter includes a primary and an alternate, in case the primary is disastrously bad. But we can’t make our alternate, because the ship was damaged in the jump, so we aren’t going anywhere.”

“And what was the inspection you shouted about?”

“The League of the Solar System will be here in eight hundred days,” Daniel said as they continued their march back to Alderman’s hall. “Even if you forced us out of the system, something that would

almost certainly kill our five thousand men, women, and children, the League would still find you. None of your problems are solved by us leaving.”

Daniel noticed that Jacob seemed thoughtful. That was a good sign. If their guards were thoughtful people, then there was still a chance reason might save the day.

CHAPTER 14

“Two days!” Margaret slammed her fist down on the table. “We’ve wasted two days, and still those racist bastards are holding my husband and everyone else!”

“Margaret,” Dr. Wells said, “We have to give this time. If we do anything rash, it might make things worse.”

“Those are not rational human beings down there,” Margaret turned and snapped at Elizabeth. “They’re racists and they are just playing for time.”

“Margaret might be right,” Catherine said, her eyes red from crying. “They won’t let anyone leave, and frankly there’s nothing that they can achieve. We’re not going anywhere, Margaret’s made that plain, so what can they possibly hope to gain?”

“Still,” Herb interjected. “They haven’t harmed anyone, yet. We should take that as a promising sign.”

“I don’t deal in signs,” Margaret answered. “They’re holding onto Edward and the rest to keep us neutralized until those bastards can figure out how to get the upper hand on us.”

“We’ve got control of the orbital space,” Elizabeth said. “What can they possibly do to get the upper hand?”

“We’re a colony ship,” Margaret pointed out. “We’re a big fat target. They have the industrial capability to manufacture orbital missiles. I suggest you ask Captain Domingo his opinion of our counter-measures capabilities.”

“Could they do that?” Elizabeth asked looking to Herb.

“Sure,” Herb sat back in his chair. “It might take them between seven to twenty-one days to re-tool for it. It depends on what they still have working.”

Margaret punched into her control station and brought up an image of the squatter camp on the plant.

"They've got the potential," she said. "And we're giving them the time to do it."

"There's still nothing we can do," Catherine cried. "Captain Domingo really doesn't feel anyone on board can pull off a rescue mission."

"We need to give them a show of force," Margaret insisted. "They don't understand just what kind of havoc we can rain down on them."

"I don't think threats are the best to deal with a paranoid people," Elizabeth said. "We need to be more careful."

"If they are getting ready to hit us, Edward doesn't and we don't have the time," Margaret said. "Once they've got their plan in place, they'll kill Edward and the others, and then us."

"You don't know that." The conviction was lacking in Herb's voice. Margaret could tell that he was as worried about Nazis on their doorstep as anyone else.

"No, I don't," Margaret agreed. "But do you want to wait until there are missiles flying up at us and the hostages are dead? We'll know then, and a fat lot of good it will do us."

"I suggest we give them a deadline," Elizabeth said. "No specific threat." She cast a challenging stare in Margaret's direction. "But let them know we expect our people back in, say, seventy-two hours."

"We don't know if we have seventy-two hours," Catherine pleaded. "We have to do something now."

"How about a supersonic fly-by?" Margaret asked. "It won't hurt anybody, but it might scare them to their senses."

"People are not scared to their senses," Elizabeth insisted. "They are scared out of them."

"Force is what they understand, Elizabeth," Margaret argued. "Have you ever heard of racists who didn't think force was the answer?"

"If we appear weak," Margaret said, turning her attention to Herb, "They'll take us down, and weak is how we are looking right now."

"There's another reason for a fly-over," Herb suggested. "We can do some close observation and see if they are putting up launchers or the like."

"And if they're not?" Elizabeth asked. "You'll scare them into doing just that."

"We can't just sit here and do nothing!" Catherine shouted. "I vote we do it!"

"Herb?" Margaret asked, "It's up to you."

"Let's do it."

#

The air was tense in Alderman's Hall. Brock sat back and let his mind wander, as Alderman Knight reported on the day's lack of progress in dealing with the mud-people.

"I'm really disturbed by the inspection," Aldermen Bryant said. "Even if we can get this group of niggers to move on, we'll just have another and another."

"That's if we're lucky," Alderman Brown chipped in. "Once Earth knows we're here, the next bunch to come out will be armed killers to wipe us out, or haul us off to the camps."

"I have to believe that the Lord will still watch out over us and protect us," Knight said.

"The Lord expects us to protect ourselves," Kyle Brock said. "Just as we do when we're facing a beast in the woods."

"We will protect ourselves," Knight insisted. "But we will not violate the Lord's Law in doing so. There is no path to salvation that leads through Hell."

"What we need right now is a plan, not a sermon." Kyle knew he shouldn't have said it even as the words slipped past his lips.

"Alderman Brock," Knight said softly. "Brother, I respect the hard job you perform for our people, but this life is short and the next life is eternal. We must see to our souls first; everything else is meaningless if we lose that."

"I did not mean to suggest otherwise," Kyle said. It was pointless to debate spiritual matters when such utterly practical matters were the real concern.

"What is certain is that we must persuade them to move on," Alderman Jeffords said. "Our people can not live with the sons of Cain on this planet."

"I am trying to persuade them," Knight repeated. "The damage to their ship appears to make that impossible."

"If there is damage to their ship," Kyle said.

"They could be lying," Alderman Bryant agreed. "We don't know that anything they have told us is true."

"Even the inspection from the 'League' may be a lie," Kyle offered. "It might be a ploy to force us to accept something that is 'inevitable'."

"That doesn't make any sense," Knight replied. "We would know it was a lie when no ship arrived in eight hundred days."

"Unless we were dead by then," Kyle said. "Too much can happen too quickly."

"Have we learned anything about how to operate their shuttle?" Knight asked.

“No,” Kyle said. “Their controls are nothing like ours, or anything the founders described. We’re two hundred years out of date. We will not crack it without their assistance.”

“We’ll simply have to pray that the good Lord opens their eyes,” Knight said.

#

“Any sign of sense?” Edward asked as Todd was led back into the cell.

“We’re still stuck,” Todd said. His voice was low and weak. None of the strength that had stood up to the political power of the League was there to Daniel’s ears.

“This is insane,” Oliver said. “We aren’t going anywhere, what do they hope to win?”

“They’re seriously scared,” Todd replied. “Why they’re so scared of us I really can’t understand.”

“We’re sons of Cain,” Daniel said. “Or at least some of us are. We’re bringing murder and sin into their perfect world.”

“Come on,” Edward said. “They’re people. This colony’s no more perfect than ours or anyone else’s.”

“I didn’t say it was, but they’re biblical literalists,” Daniel explained. “Rapture and revelation are as real to them as this wall.” Daniel knocked his knuckles on the wall of the cell.

“So what happens when we don’t leave?” Oliver asked. “Is that when they show their true face, and start killing us?”

“Maybe,” Todd said glumly as he sat on one of the beds.

“Maybe not,” Daniel countered. “They seem pretty devout about ‘thou shall not kill’, which is probably our best hope right now.”

“I’d prefer not to trust to hope,” Oliver said. “I want to get back to the Independence.”

“Me, too,” Daniel said.

“I’ll bet you do,” Todd snapped under his breath.

“Save it,” Daniel said. Todd merely snorted and rolled over facing the wall on the bed.

“What’s going on?” Edward asked.

“Personal matters,” Daniel answered.

#

“Ready to depart when you are,” pilot Billy Charles said to Margaret.

“Herb,” Margaret said into the radio. “You tell them that we expect our people released. Say it about five minutes before the fly-over.”

“Will do,” Herb answered. “Remember, this is a demonstration. Don’t do any damage, Margaret.”

“Edward’s still down there,” she replied. “I’ll be careful.”

#

“We aren’t getting anywhere,” Alderman Bryant complained.

“Perhaps we should let them go,” Knight suggested. “As a token of trust and good faith.”

“I’d not trust any niggers,” Alderman Jeffords said. “We know what they are like.”

“The only thing that has kept us safe so far is that we have hostages,” Kyle said bluntly. “Without them, we’d be dead or beaten already.”

“Perhaps not,” Knight answered. “The Lord will provide and protect us. We have treated our brothers with fear and inhospitality. That is not the Lord’s way.”

“You aren’t calling these niggers our brothers, are you?” Alderman Brown’s voice cracked as he screeched.

“Cain was brother to Abel,” Knight replied. “It is our duty to be true to Abel and treat them better than they would treat us.”

“We aren’t treating them badly,” Kyle said. “We’re just making sure they don’t do the same to us. No commandments have been broken.”

“God is not a lawyer,” Knight warned. “You can not escape the consequences of sin on a technicality.”

“We have to face reality,” Kyle insisted, aware that his frustration and anger were getting the best of him.

“We make one misstep here, and you may as well invite beasts to our harvest festivals. The effect will be the same.”

“The only reality is God’s reality.” Knight turned to the other Aldermen. “We should consider releasing these people, the mud-people included, and trust to the Lord to protect us.”

#

The town center was a jumble of streamers and hanging lanterns. At the south end a band played merrily as young men and women enjoyed square dances and other patterned dances. Tables were stacked high with food from the harvest, and despite the coming of the mud-people, there was an infectious sense of happiness and optimism in the air.

“I have to rest,” Jacob protested as he plopped heavily into a chair. Cindi stood above him, laughing and glowing with happiness.

“You’re going to wear this boy out before you ever get married,” Russell said around bites of pie.

“Oh, I think Jacob has lots of years left,” Cindi said.

“But maybe not very many dances,” Jacob offered.

“And lots of dances,” Cindi said.

“Hi,” Brian said as he joined the group at the side of the dance floor.

“Any luck learning how to fly that shuttle?” Russell asked.

“It’s not going to happen,” Brian said. “Not without their help.”

“I don’t think they’re going to help us,” Jacob said. “Not the way we’ve locked them up.”

“What else can we do?” Cindi said. “We can’t have a big nigger like that one on the loose.”

“I don’t know,” Jacob admitted. “All I know is that I wouldn’t help anyone who locked me up.”

“We’re being too nice to them,” Russell said. “That’s the problem. They’re not good Christians like us, so we should stop expecting them to act like ones.”

“We can’t be cruel,” Cindi offered. “You can’t do God’s work with the Devil’s tools.”

“If they were Christians and white-folk, I’d say you were right,” Russell looked down on the much shorter Cindi. “But these are heathens and mud-people. You can’t expect them to act right, and the only thing they understand is strength. If we’re weak, they’ll tear us up as fast as death-angels in a frenzy, you can count on it.”

“Well, it’s not up to us,” Jacob said. “And I trust Alderman Knight and Brock to know what’s right.”

“Anyway,” Brian suggested. “They’ve behaved themselves so far, maybe everything will work itself out.”

#

“Our message has been transmitted,” Herb’s face looked lean in the holographic display. Margaret wondered how long it had been since any of them had gotten real sleep. She knew that she had cried herself to sleep every night, and she didn’t doubt that Catherine had been doing the same.

“We’re starting our run,” Margaret reported. Margaret nodded to the pilot, and the shuttle began accelerating.

Two hundred and fifty kilometers west lay the squatters camp. Margaret wished she could land and rescue Edward, but that wasn’t practical. She’d only be giving the scum more hostages to tie their hands with. All that was left was this desperate gamble, and Margaret had no doubts just how desperate it really was.

There was a chance that some sense might be scared into the scum, but Margaret didn’t objectively think it was a very good one. Still,

waiting and giving the racists a chance to prepare offensive weapons was not an answer, so they were left with this.

Margaret tapped her console and generated a high-speed, high-resolution camera on the surface of the shuttle. Even though they would be passing over at better than Mach five, Margaret expected to gather detailed intelligence on the enemy.

“Twenty seconds,” the pilot announced.

“I want to add something to our flight profile,” Margaret said. “Something to illuminate their situation.”

#

Jacob danced and tried to forget Havilah’s troubles. Forgetting was easy while he looked at Cindi, her dirty blonde hair spinning through air as she dance, her mouth wide in a joyous grin that warmed his soul.

Suddenly Jacob found himself thrown to the ground as a massive shock wave blasted through the festival. Glassware exploded, lights and lanterns crashed to the dirt.

For a moment, only silence could be heard, then came the low groans of injured and shocked people. Jacob pulled his face up from the dirt and saw Cindi lying a few feet away, blood in her hair.

Jacob scrambled to Cindi and starting assessing the wounds in a well-practiced manner. Even as training took over and led him through the check-list, a part of his mind was screaming in emotional pain.

Not gushing, not spurting, that was good, it wasn’t likely that any arteries had been hit. The blood flow was even and already slowing. Carefully Jacob removed a shard of glass from her head as Cindi started to sit up.

“Stay still,” Jacob said softly. “You have a lot of glass in your scalp.”

“What happened?” she asked.

“Supersonic fly by,” Brian said as he crawled over to them. “They went out to sea.”

Jacob stood up and followed Brian’s pointing finger, searching out to sea. He was dimly aware of the rest of the celebrants getting to their feet also, the ruins of the festival scattered around them.

The nighttime ocean lit with a bright blue jet as the shuttle’s fusion rockets fired, instantly transforming the ocean beneath the shuttle to steam as the craft shot back towards space.

“They could have roasted us alive,” Brian said.

The niggers were getting angry. How much time did Havilah have left?

Chapter 15

“What are you doing, George?” Jacob asked as he walked up to the back of the apartment complex. George stopped loading supplies the wagon and turned around.

“We’re heading for the mine,” he explained. “I’ve got to get Debbie out of here before the niggers land.” George stole a quick glance up to his wife. Jacob could see from three floors below that Debbie was pale and frightened.

“The wood is no place for a woman in the family way,” Jacob said. “Even with a hunt just last week, there’re still too many beasts out there.”

“Better to take our chance there than wait for the niggers to come and get us.” George returned to loading the wagon.

“How are you going to pull that wagon?” Jacob asked as he looked George in the eye. “You going to take a tractor? Steal from your neighbor?”

George stopped in mid-load.

“Anyone who needs a tractor can ask for one,” George said weakly.

“And none are being turned over to anyone right now,” Jacob replied. “You’re not the only one with this idea. Listen no one’s going to let the nigger get anywhere close to Debbie or the others.”

Jacob reached up and removed a canister of water from the wagon.

“Why don’t you get inside and help Debbie?” Jacob suggested. “Give her some of your strength. The Lord will protect us, just as he always has.”

"It's not going to do any good, is it?" George asked. "We won't kill and they will." George's shoulders sagged as he accepted Jacob's advice.

"Trust in Jesus and God," Jacob said. "Everything moves to their plan."

Jacob moved on. George hadn't been the first to want to fly, and Jacob knew George wasn't going to be the last. People were scared, more scared than when the beast alarm had sounded last year. Seven feet of snarling teeth and the devil's own cunning couldn't scare people like niggers did.

As Jacob moved towards the town center, he stopped people here and there sending them back to their homes. All of the Watchmen were out today, and it seemed as if all of Havilah was too.

In the town square Jacob found the largest commotion yet. A string of six wagons were hitched together, along with two of Havilah's steers at the lead. A crowd of people surrounded Russell as he waved his shock-club under their noses. Running up from the alleys between the apartment Jacob saw more Watchmen coming. Jacob elbowed, gently, his way through the crowd.

"You unhitch those steers right now," Russell ordered. "Or I'll see you tossed over that wall."

"I'm not sticking around for those niggers, Russell," David snapped back. "So you can just play watchman somewhere else."

"Calm down!" Jacob barked, though it didn't have much effect on the crowd.

"I've got this handled," Russell said to Jacob.

"I'm certain of that." Jacob wanted to sure he didn't undercut Russell while an angry crowd teetered on the edge.

"But let's make sure no one says anything they might regret." Jacob inserted himself between David and Russell.

"The Aldermen want everyone inside the wall, inside their homes," Jacob said loudly, but tried as best he could to make it friendly as well. "They're handling the niggers and the others. This will blow over."

"The only thing that's blowing over are the nigger ships," someone shouted.

"Break this up," Russell ordered again. "Or I'll break it up for you."

The crowd became aware of the other Watchmen, shock-clubs out, surrounding the mob. Russell tapped his club against his thigh and sneered at David.

“David,” Jacob said softly. “What do you think you’re going to achieve? Even if you make it to the mines without getting beasts on you, there’s not much food up there, and not enough to last more than a few days.”

“I just thought...” David started.

“You thought would make sure your wife and baby were okay, and that’s good. But think what will happen to them if a beast jumps you.” Jacob saw that David’s imagination was already starting to work out that horrible mental image. David turned and looked back at the others who were going to leave Havilah with him, then looked back to Russell and the armed Watchmen.

Five minutes later Jacob had managed to convince people to go home. Then he sent the rest of the Watchmen off to keep an eye on everyone else. Havilah was jumpier than Jacob had ever seen it and he was afraid of what they might do.

“There’s no need to for the clubs,” Jacob said to Russell when they were alone.

“People are scared shitless,” Russell said. “They aren’t always going to listen to reason.”

“You pulling a club just makes them more scared.”

Russell brushed the hair from his eyes and locked a stare with Jacob.

“If they’re scared of me, they’ll do what I want.”

“That’s ain’t the way to do it,” Jacob refused to be browbeaten by Russell. Though Russell was a year and half older, Jacob was lead Watchman.

“You want to pull me off the Watchmen?” Russell challenged. Jacob didn’t reply.

“Then let me do it my way,” Russell snapped as he turned and stormed off. “We don’t have time for games.”

#

Daniel looked around the mess hall of the *Anson*. Blood pooled in the puddles here and there, interrupted by the bodies of the rest of the crew. The nationalist had finally succeeded in breaking someone and getting access to the ship and were now headed forwards to the bridge. Daniel moved as quickly as he could while still striving to remain silent and headed aft towards the engineering spaces.

Two decks aft Daniel found the body of Tommy Franco, strangled. Daniel guessed that Tommy had been the first victim, he had to make sure that they wouldn’t be any more than the crew of the *Anson*.

Daniel opened his eyes slowly and took in the cramped cell. Strangely he felt at peace, even while his life was in danger again. he

dreamt of the *Anson*, but now it failed to become a nightmare. It simply was what it was.

“Morning,” Edward said between bites of bread and last night’s stew.

“They didn’t bring breakfast,” Oliver said.

“Guess last night’s stunt has them stirred up,” Daniel guessed as he stood from the bunk.

“Sounded like that shuttle pass broke every window in the colony,” Edward said.

“Except ours,” Oliver noted.

“Yeah,” Daniel agreed. There had been a brief hope of escape, but the reinforced glass of the cell hadn’t even cracked.

“Save some for Todd,” Oliver said as Daniel took a bit of bread. “He still hasn’t woke up.”

Daniel nodded and sat on the floor with his bread, next to Edward and Oliver.

“What do you think is going to happen now?” Oliver asked.

“Depends,” Daniel said, “A show of force either compels respect or fear. That was a desperate thing to do.”

“You don’t approve?” Edward asked.

“I don’t know,” Daniel admitted. “But if they freak out down here, it could make things real dicey for all of us. You and me mostly.”

“Racists,” Oliver spat.

#

“We are running out of time!” Alderman Bryant’s voice was high and girlish as he spoke. “Those niggers are going to be landing any second.”

“I doubt that,” Kyle said. “If that was their plan they wouldn’t have warned us with that fly-by. No, they’re trying to scare us in submission.”

“We can’t submit,” Mercer said. “They’d round us up and ship off to the camps, and heaven save our women and girls.”

“The Lord will protect us,” Knight offered, but his voice was weak and barely audible.

“The Lord has already given us his protection,” Kyle suggested. “He has delivered some of the enemy to us. It’s up to us to know what to do.”

“They aren’t going to help us,” Brown complained. “That’s useless.”

“They can be convinced.” Kyle tensed as he spoke. If the rest of the Aldermen weren’t ready to do what was required he might be

ejected from the Aldermen, and then there would be no one left ready and able to protect Havilah.

“What exactly are you suggesting?” Knight asked, more than a hint of disapproval in his tone.

“Give me the prisoners,” Kyle said. “We don’t have time for them to see reason. Alderman Bryant is right about that. We might be able to stall for a little more time, but soon they are going to give up on the prisoners and we won’t have any leverage at all.”

“I’m not sure...” Knight started.

“Have you seen the streets?” Alderman Mercer said. “Our people are ready to run into the fangs of the beasts. we have to do something.”

“I see two choice left to us,” Kyle suggested. “we surrender to their mercy, or we do what we have to. I move that the prisoners be released to my custody, as Aldermen of the Watchmen.”

The debate raged for twenty minutes more, but in the end the Alderman voted against Knight and the prisoners were Kyle’s.

#

“They’re not even answering the radio, except to say they will contact us soon,” Herb reported. Margaret noticed that Herb’s hands twitched nervously as he spoke. The laughter had vanished from his eyes and voice.

“Damn it,” Margaret cursed. “Stupid, stubborn racists!”

“What do we do now?” Catherine asked.

“Give it a little more time,” Herb said. “Even Japan took three days to work out a surrender. For all we know they are scrambling to work something out.”

“We could use the surveillance I got to plan a rescue,” Margaret suggested. Waiting taxed her more than anything else. Life was much simpler when you had problems you could grapple with and solve by action.

“The same surveillance that showed they hadn’t even begun preparing any form of offensive weapons?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes, that surveillance.” Christ that woman wouldn’t let a point go.

“Not workable,” Herb said. “We don’t have anything that can land on ground. we put down in that bay and they’ll be ready before we even get out of the shuttle. We can’t sneak in.”

“How about if we land at a lake or something and go in on foot?” Catherine tapped the controlled in the conference desk and a holographic image of the alternate landing zone chosen by Daniel and Edward popped into existence.

“That’s some sixty kilometers away,” Herb said. “and we don’t know how hostile the native life is, and we’d have to find a way across that wall.”

“A wall surrounded by a thirty meter killing field,” Margaret added. The rest of the Governing Council had to be made aware of just how paranoid and violent these racist were.

Catherine put her head to the conference table and hid her face. Hiding wasn’t going to do any good, but Margaret was beginning to fear there was nothing any of them could do for Edward and the rest.

#

“Leave me alone,” Todd said and turned back to face the wall of the cell.

“You can’t give up,” Daniel said softly enough that only Todd heard him. “Think of Catherine and Ryan.”

“Are you sure you’re not thinking of them for me?” Todd turned his head and faced Daniel, anger and despair fighting to control of his expression.

“I don’t care,” Daniel lied. “All I wanted was a good screw, and I got that.”

“Go hide!” Todd shouted. “Save your hide like you did on the *Anson!*”

Daniel scooted quickly away from Todd.

“What the hell did you say to him?” Edward asked.

“Can’t let him give up,” Daniel said sitting on the opposing bed. “I can’t have that on my head too.”

“It’s not your fault,” Oliver said. “We should have listened to Margaret. God, can you believe I said that?”

The nervous laughter of the three men stopped as the door to their cell swung open. Guards, now armed with rifles Daniel noticed, stood to one side.

“We’re moving you,” The lead guard said. “Get up and get out of there nigger.”

With a slight tremble in his knees, Daniel stood and walked out of the cell, as he did the door was shut behind him closing him off from the others.

The guards indicated where Daniel was to go, and followed behind. This time no one walked ahead or beside him. Daniel could feel the fear in the air as clearly as he tasted the salt in the sea breeze.

the guards directed Daniel south, through the older section of the settlement. The building here were industrial and operated autonomously. A fusion plant, very well maintained Daniel noted, provided a constant background of white noise. From the south Daniel

smelled the foul retch of pigs and other livestock. This was not a residential section of Havilah.

“In there,” the guard ordered.

Daniel was shoved into a one room shed, signs of hurried emptying indicated it’s usual purpose had not been for jailing. This makeshift cell had neither bedding nor toilet. This were certainly getting worse.

#

“I can’t believe you put Russell in charge of the prisoners, sir.” Jacob paced back and forth in Alderman Brock’s office like a caged beast. “He’s not the right kind of guy for this.”

“Everything’s different now Jacob,” Brock said gently. “That makes Russell the right person for this and you’re not.”

“I don’t understand that at all.” Jacob stopped and met Brock’s eye. “Can you explain that to me? Please?”

“Cain slew Able because Able trusted Cain,” Brock replied. “He shouldn’t have. If we wait and trust to the mud-people circling us to do the right thing, or behave like people should, we’ll end up as dead as Cain.”

“I know that,” Jacob protested.

“Yes, I know you do,” Brock agreed. “But I also know you’d have a hard time doing what we have to do to save our people.”

“What is that?” Jacob sat across from Brock, a chill seemed to have crept into the room.

“You really don’t need to know,” Brock said.

“I’m the lead Watchman,” Jacob answered.

“And you answer to me,” Brock reminded Jacob. “As Alderman I make the final decision what is in Havilah’s best interest.”

“Within God’s law,” Jacob said. Brock didn’t reply, Jacob’s objection hung in the air between them like an accusation.

“God will protect us,” Jacob insisted, “But if we turn our backs on him, he will forsake us”

“You’re quoting Alderman Knight’s sermons,” Brock suggested. “God is on the side of the prepared. A hunter without a rifle is beast food, no matter how pious he is.”

Jacob sat in the seat across from Brock’s desk, shocked at what he was hearing.

“You’re a good man, Jacob,” Brock said. “And you’re a smart one too. Church sermons are the way to lead your life, they will make you and everyone who listens a better man, but they are no way to protect yourself from animals and other men.”

"I can't believe you're saying this." Jacob felt as if he were falling and would never strike the ground.

"It's a lesson I learned the hard way," Brock said. "It's a lesson I am going to save my neighbors from ever having to learn -- that includes you."

Brock stood and came over to Jacob. Brock's face was blank as he sat on the corner of the desk and took Jacob by the shoulder.

"I know what kind of man Russell is," Brock said. "And I know what kind of things that need to be done. We don't have time. Any day now the niggers are going to write off the prisoners, and before the sun sets that day we will start dying."

Jacob jerked as the prediction.

"The only way we can avoid this is by being practical. Later, we'll worry about the sin, first let's make sure Cindi and all other women and children in Havilah are safe."

"It doesn't feel right," Jacob complained.

"No," Brock agreed. "It doesn't feel right, but it is what we have to do. It'll feel worse letting our people be butchered."

"I don't know..." Jacob started.

"I do," Brock sat back on his desk and looked out of the window towards the sea. "That's why it's not your job. It's not really Russell's job either, Russell is just my tool. It's my job and God I hope you never have one like it."

Brock turn back to Jacob.

"Go on," Brock said. "Get out of here. You've got scouts to take care of and a girl to keep happy. Leave the niggers to me."

"Yes, sir." Jacob rose slowly from his seat and walked out of the office.

It was a dirty business, a nasty, foul, business, but if Kyle Brock knew that if he didn't attended to it, no one would.

There had been a day when Kyle believed, just as Jacob did now, in God's law as divine guidance but those days were long gone. Washed away in the swell of a storm tossed ocean.

That morning the weather had been fine, no it had been better than fine, it was a glorious morning. As the fishing boat chugged its way out to sea Kyle had felt that there was nothing wrong with the world. He was young and healthy, he was married to the most beautiful woman in Havilah, truly only good things, he had thought, lay ahead.

By noon the barometer had started dropping, Naomi wanted to turn back, but Kyle thought it was just a squall. he had ridden several out as a teenager he knew he had nothing to fear from them.

By mid-afternoon the winds had started in and the barometer had continued to drop. Kyle knew they were facing something more than just a summer storm, this storm was gaining strength faster than the boat could speed home.

They didn't make it back to Samson Bay that afternoon. The seas and the winds were just too much. It would have been suicide to try to drive the channel in that tempest, so they were forced to ride the storm at sea, close enough to see the lights of Havilah as they flickered from the storm's assault, but too far to be any help at all.

Alex saw the wave first. A mountain of dark water rushing towards the fishing boat, barely visible in the dim gray lit of Goliath. Kyle had tried to put the bow into the wave, but the sluggish ship couldn't change course fast enough. The wave crashed over the ship, washing across the beam with irresistible force.

The scene played itself out for Kyle every night in his nightmares. Naomi, swept from her feet and sliding toward the water. Kyle, one arm locked about a post of the tiny bridge, reaching out for his wife, and just brushing her finger tips as she was swept away.

Alex and Jack had also been swept over the side, but in his nightmares it was only Naomi he saw. It was only Naomi that he failed to save.

The storm passed by dawn, but daylight was dim and had been ever since.

While listening to Brock's sermons the very next Sunday, Kyle realized there was no God. There was no plan and no protection, save what men made for themselves. He had failed Naomi, he wasn't going to fail the rest of Havilah.

Chapter 16

"It's your choice what happens," Kyle said as Russell strapped the hulking nigger, Daniel, into the chair.

"You can cooperate now and avoid a lot of pain, or you can be stupid and get hurt." Kyle leaned against the table set up at the far end of the room. "It really is your choice."

"My choice is let us go," Daniel said. "We'll work something out."

"We can't do that. You'd kill us without a qualm." Kyle turned and looked at the rest of the boys in the room. Russell was the only Watchman present, Kyle knew he needed at least one Watchman, but he wasn't going to make it any more than that.

"Remember," Kyle said. "He'll lie and saying anything to get his way. They aren't good christians like we are, and they don't value life like we do. As long as you are strong, what you do in here will save us all."

"It's not true," Daniel protested. "We aren't here to hurt you."

"How do we operate your shuttle?" Kyle asked.

Daniel shook his head in defiance.

"Hook him up," Kyle ordered.

Electrodes was taped to Daniel's bare chest. Kyle saw both fear and determination in the nigger's face. This one wouldn't break as easily as Kyle hoped.

"How?" Kyle asked again, again Daniel shook his head.

"Shock him," Kyle ordered. Russell twisted the dial on the nigger-rigged controls and Daniel tensed as the electric shock course through him.

"How?" Kyle repeated, again Daniel refused, this was going to be a very long day.

#

Margaret avoided her bed. The smart-fibers wanted to massage her, to disperse the tension the bed detected, but she was in no mood to be soothed. Crying helped her emotionally, but was otherwise useless. Margaret was powerless to improve the situation. Powerlessness galled her.

The racists were too idiotic to realize that they had no cards to play. Margaret was fast running out of illusions that this sad affair would have a happy ending. She had dreamt that Eddie hadn't returned, murdered along with Daniel and the rest of the negotiation team. The dream itself didn't frighten her, the likelihood that it was already reality did.

Get Edward back, that was the most important thing right now. She wasn't going to give up on him, or the others, not until she knew that there wasn't any hope left. After that there would be a reckoning. The rest of the Governing Council didn't realize that this was already a war. It was senseless to rely on the League for protection. The racists were terrorists, when the time came, they would be treated as such.

#

The guard threw Edward back into the cell, and mercifully, didn't take anyone else back out. Perhaps, Daniel hoped, today's torture was finally over.

"How are you holding up?" Daniel managed as he crawled over to Edward.

"I'm a cargo pilot," Edward croaked. "I wasn't trained for this shit."

"None of us were," Daniel said. "I take it they were trying to get the codes to the shuttle?"

"Yeah," Edward answered. "Fat chance of them getting it from me."

"They'll get it from someone, eventually," Daniel predicted. "No one holds out forever."

"So it's all over?" Oliver asked joining Daniel and Edward.

"No," Daniel said. "Just the clocking is ticking, and we don't know how fast."

"We're still screwed," Edward said.

"I'm tired of this shit," Todd said sharply from across the cell. Daniel turned as Todd raced his face from his knees.

"It's time we did something instead of waiting for something to happen." Todd's voice was firm and set, Daniel feared it was from a resignation of their coming death rather than a resolve to survive.

"Do you have something in mind?" Oliver asked.

“First we have to buy time, and then,” Todd stood and crossed the cell, dropping to the floor next to his teammates. “Next we have to escape.”

“We make a break for it, I think it’ll mean gunshots, not those taser clubs,” Daniel said.

“Well cross that bridge when we come to it,” Todd looked at each of them in the face. “I intend to see my wife and son again,” Todd said as he looked at Daniel. “Any of you want to give up?”

The other held their breaths, waiting for Todd’s plan. Anger in his face was beginning to become action.

“Let’s give them what they want,” Todd suggested.

“Are you crazy?” Oliver said.

“Listen,” Todd looked to Edward and Daniel. “Only you two can unlock the shuttle for flight, but Oliver and I have other access codes. If we give those up, it might buy us time while they try to figure out the shuttle.”

“Risky,” Daniel suggested. “Once they’re in the network they might crack it. They aren’t stupid.”

“Yeah, but if we try to hang tough we’ll give it up eventually,” Todd countered. “They aren’t the brightest torturers, or else they would have split us up.”

“Lack of experience,” Daniel said. “But I think they’re fast learners.”

“All the more reason why we have to get out of here as fast as we can,” Todd replied. “I say worth the risk and I’m still the Chief Executive Officer of Seclusion.”

#

“It can’t be done,” Captain Doming answered.

“Are you telling me it is physically *impossible* to rescue our people?” Margaret asked. She sat back in her chair and tried to stare down the starship captain. Captain Domingo pressed his thin lips together and shook his head.

“Don’t be foolish,” he snapped. “And don’t try to bait me either. I’m in no mood for it.”

“I’m in no mood to hear that we’re helpless up here!” Margaret swept her hand indicating the ship around them. “We’ve got orbital space, that has got to count for something.”

“It doesn’t unless you’re looking for bombardment,” Captain Domingo said. He turned and pointed to the squatter colony.

“But we’re not equipped to sneak down there. Our shuttles are designed for a water landing. That means a deep lake, a sheltered bay, or out to sea. The bay is right out as a subtle landing site...”

“Don’t get sarcastic,” Margaret warned.

“Don’t get stupid then,” Domingo continued with his points. “Out to sea is doable, we could land over the horizon, but the squatters would see us coming literally kilometers away.”

“What if we approach at night?”

“Without decent charts? We could run aground before we knew it. Then we’re out two shuttles and the personnel. That leaves a deep lake, there’s one sixty klicks west of the squatters.”

“Forget coming at them by land,” Margaret said. “That wall is surrounded by a hundred meter killing field. Our shuttle are duel use, we can convert them to jet-landings, can’t we?”

“Absolutely,” Domingo agreed. “It takes the ship’s machine shop fifteen days.”

“Christ, we’re screwed,” Margaret swore under her breath.

“It get worse.” Captain Domingo tapped the control in the conference table before him. “The squatters are aboard the shuttle.”

“Have they unlocked it?” Margaret asked.

“No, they haven’t even been able to access the PEM-based controls, but if they do we could be in even bigger trouble.” A holographic image of the moon appeared in the center of the conference table. A bright blue line indicated the orbit of the Independence.

“That shuttle could be jury-rigged into an anti-ship missile, and we don’t have the maneuverability to dodge it,” Domingo offered.

“We’re running out of time.” Margaret slammed her fist into the table and stormed out of the conference room.

#

Jacob hurried over to the new jail. He knew it was necessary what they were doing, but still his stomach turned at keeping secrets. Secrets and lies were too close to each other. Jacob never imagined he would be forced to violate a commandment as a Watchmen, it went; against everything being a Watchman stood for.

“Hi, Jacob,” Don said at the door as Jacob approached. Jacob noticed that Don’s face was pale and drawn tight. This weighed heavy on everyone, not just Jacob.

The stench of piss, shit, and fear assaulted Jacob as he entered the interrogation room. Todd was strapped into the chair, electrical lead taped to his skin. Around the chair lay a pool of sweat and piss. The sharp tang of the urine burned at Jacob’s nose. It filled his mouth until he could taste it’s foulness.

“He started talking,” Russell said.

“Please,” Todd whispered. “Just stop.”

Jacob quickly scanned the room. The rest of the boys helping Russell weren't Watchmen. There was Frankie, a trouble maker and fight starter as long as Jacob could remember, next to Frankie was Alex, another person that Jacob remembered hauling before the council. What was Alderman Brock doing having these boys here? Nearly everyone in the room had been trouble to the Watchmen at one time or another. Separated from these trouble makers, Brian stood in the corner of the room.

"You okay?" Jacob asked stepping over to Brian.

"No," Brian's voice was weak. "I don't ever want to see anything like this again."

"We'll get through this." Jacob said. A scream from Todd shattered the air of the room, causing Jacob to leap. Russell was at the controls to the electrodes, viciously twisting the dial.

"I think you're holding back, nigger-lover," Russell snarled.

"I have enough," Brian said, but his voice was so weak Jacob doubted that anyone except himself had heard it.

"Stop it!" Jacob ordered.

Russell stopped the current and stalked over to Jacob and Brian.

"This isn't your show," Russell said in a low voice. "Alderman Brock told me to get everything out of these assholes and that's what I'm going to do."

"This isn't right," Jacob challenged. "And you know it."

"I have what I need," Brian interrupted. "If it's not enough we can come back for more." Brian stepped between Jacob and Russell, continuing for the door. Jacob fell in behind Brian with only a quick glance towards Russell.

"We'll stop for now," Russell said as they left. "But we can't be soft or they'll kill us all."

#

"It'll take me awhile to work this out," Brian said from the pilot's seat. Kyle Brock nodded and watched as Brian activated various controls, causing them to wax into existence and fade away just as mysteriously when he rejected them.

"Seems rather elegant and versatile," Kyle offered.

"Yes, sir," Brian agreed. "I think you can replicate any control on just about any surface."

"Keep at it," Kyle said as he turned for the hatch back to the passenger compartment. "Watchman Gibson, can we have a chat?" Kyle tossed to Jacob.

Jacob followed obediently, securing the hatch for privacy as they departed the cockpit.

"I'm not used to be questioned," Kyle said.

"It doesn't seem right," Jacob said. "It doesn't seem Christian."

"I know Jacob, believe me I know," Kyle sat on the edge of a table. "I hate what they are forcing us to do, but we're on our own. No one is going to watch out for us, no one is going to protect us, except ourselves."

Jacob's face contorted slightly as he listen. Kyle knew that Jacob heard but didn't understand. the boy still listen to Knight's sermons a little too much, still trusted in divine miracles would save the pious.

"After this is over with," Kyle explained. "We'll go back to the way things were. This is only a temporary phase, but if we don't do this, everything we've built, everything our founding fathers died for will be ruined."

"You don't want that do you?" Kyle asked directly.

"No," Jacob looked down to the floor of the compartment. "You know I don't."

"Of course not, no one does." Kyle stood up from the table and put a hand on Jacob's shoulder.

"I'm glad you feel this way," Kyle said. "I'd be very worried if the lead Watchman didn't feel like this. Please, trust me that I know what I am doing, okay?"

"Okay," Jacob agreed. Jacob turned and stated back into the cockpit. With one foot through the hatch Jacob twisted to face Kyle again.

"Do you think this is be over soon?" Jacob asked.

"I do," Kyle answered. "One way or another."

Alone with his thoughts, Kyle sat down and started display some of the files he had discovered with Todd Moss's access.

The solution to Havilah's problems were right there, if only he had the nerve to implement it. The colony ship was equipped with a messenger drone pre-configured to a flight back to Earth. This was how the League would be alerted if the colony settled their primary or their alternate destination. It could also serve to recommend a quarantine of a planet if any number of conditions existed. It was the plague warning that had sparked Kyle's imagination.

Microbes and viruses capable of jumping species were a rarity. Independent evolutionary paths protect mankind from a universe of tiny invaders -- most of the time.

But there was the odd 'hot-world', Kyle learned from the shuttle's database. Red-zoned worlds declared off limits to all contact due to dangerous species-jumping pathogens. If Havilah was declared a 'hot-world' they would left alone, not bothered by anyone.

It looked to be fairly simple to program the message drone to return to Earth with the announcement that the primary colonization target was a hot-world, but that would be enough.

The League would follow-up on these colonists in eight-hundred days. Even if they were forced to their secondary target, once the League arrived the game would be up. No, the hot-world plan only worked if there wasn't anyone left to tell the League the truth.

Kyle bit his lip and thought it over. To save Havilah he needed to murder five thousand people. He would save eleven thousand, but a murderer he would remain. Still, he could see no other solution and they were fast running out of time.

After it was over, he would present himself to the other Aldermen and take his punishment. He could salvage that much honor for himself, the important thing would be make sure Havilah was safe.

It had to be secret, that was certain. Knight wouldn't stand for it, and who knows how many others. Kyle respected their ideals, but this was reality and when teeth met flesh, ideals were no protection.

A finger tapping a staccato beat on the tabletop, Kyle began working out the details.

#

Herb's quarters were different in tone than his offices. Where Herb kept his office walls decorated with images of past engineering achievements, here still and moving video art adorned the walls. Margaret noted that none of the art was very expensive, yet it was a side of Herb that she hadn't seen before.

Herb sat behind his desk, his large frame and balding head almost lost amid a floor to ceiling image of a deep space nebula, beautifully rendered in false color.

"This isn't a disagreement," Margaret insisted. "We aren't having a contractual dispute, Herb. These people religious terrorist and they've got a gun to our heads."

"That's over the top," Herb said. He got up from his desk and walked over to his liquor cabinet.

"It's the truth," Margaret snapped. "Damn Couldn't anyone here see just what was going on. Earth bled for a hundred and fifty years because of fanatics like these. Do you want to see that start up all over again?"

"It's trouble, but it's a lot smaller than that, Maggie." Herb offered Margaret a glass, but she shook her head in refusal. Herb shrugged, and with a lifetime of experience in reduced gravity environment, expertly poured himself a drink.

“This is the start of it,” Margaret crossed the room, resisting the urge to stomp, a useless gesture on one-third gravity. “Seclusion, and all of humanity is going to depend on what we do here.”

“Oh, please.” Herb turned to face Margaret, his hazel eyes narrowed. “This problem is no bigger than getting our people back. After that we settled the Southern Continent and wait for the League to show up in eight hundred days. The nuts will be packed and shipped home. No more troubles.”

“It’s not going to happen that way,” Margaret moved in closed, forcing Herb’s chin nearly to his chest as he stared down at her. “Option one; The League declares it their moon and we are given a lift home and dumped back dirt side. Broke and without Seclusion. Option two; The League splits the moon between us, and in a generation or two we’re at war. There is no third option Herb, ‘cause no politician is going to bring that lot home to raise trouble.”

“Do you have a suggestion, or are you here to just predict doom and gloom?” Herb stepped around Margaret and sat back at his desk.

“Because if you can get our people back, I’d be more than happy to make it happen. I’ve got a nav and refueling station to build.”

“I’ve got a husband down there!” Margaret leaned across the desk until the tip her nose nearly touched Herb’s large round nose. “Don’t lecture me!”

“Then offer a solution or shut up.”

“We declare, officially, that these are terrorists.” Margaret said simply.

“Oh, that’ll solve everything will it?” Herb leaned beyond Margaret reach across the desk. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“It’s the most important step we can take,” Margaret explained. “Herb, Seclusion is a government, not just a colonial corporation, we have the legal right to make war.”

“War?” Herb’s eyes opened slightly wider.

“Against terrorists we are legally entitled and compelled to take whatever actions are required to safeguard our people and the League. It’s time we stopped talking and made it clear to the Fascists down there that they can submit and release our people or they can die.” Margaret stood up straight and stared into Herb’s eyes.

“Let’s avoid that is we can.” Herb said softly.

“We’re already there.” Margaret turned on the balls of her feet and left.

#

“He’s waking up,” Oliver said. Daniel moved quickly to Todd’s said.

“Don’t move,” Daniel said as Todd’s eyes flickered open. “Rest for awhile.”

“I told them,” Todd said, tears streaming from his eyes. “I told them.”

“That was the plan,” Oliver said.

“No,” Todd shook his head and turned over, trying to hide his face from the others. “I would have told them anyway.”

Oliver took his hands away as Todd’s shoulder shook with sobs.

“We all will,” Daniel said. “Eventually we all will tell them anything they want to know.”

“I’m tired of waiting!” Edward said. “I’m not going to just sit here and wait to be tortured and killed.”

“Edward’s right,” Oliver said. “We can’t hold out.” Oliver looked down at Todd, still crying on the floor.

“I’m not going to be able to take it,” Oliver said, his eyes locked on Todd. “I know it.”

“What do you suggest?” Daniel asked.

“The next time we have just one or two guards, we rush them.” Edward said. “We take ’em down and make a run for it.”

“Todd can’t run,” Daniel countered.

“Fuck, I can’t,” Todd rolled over, tears still pouring from his eyes. “I can run and I can kill.”

“Escape,” Daniel urged. “Not revenge or we’ll all die here.”

Chapter 17

Like the other Aldermen, Alderman Knight lived in a house not an apartment. It was a privilege that Havilah granted without any resentment to their leaders as the rest of the people lived in cramped and crowded apartments.

As Jacob walked up to Alderman Knight's home he wondered if the Southern continent would be more hospitable. Perhaps there everyone could have a home and land of their own.

Dismissing the fantasy from his head, Jacob knocked on Alderman Knight's door.

"Hello, Jacob," Cheryl Knight said warmly as she opened the door. Alderman Knight's wife stepped aside, inviting Jacob in.

"Can I speak with Alderman Knight?" Jacob asked as Cheryl closed the door behind him.

"Of course, I'll get him right away." She hurried down the short hallway to the back of the home, calling out over her shoulder. "Do you need anything to drink, Jacob? I have some cider that is just dandy!"

"Yes, please," Jacob shouted back.

Jacob sat on the couch, but didn't wait long as Alderman Knight entered the room almost immediately.

"Afternoon, Jacob," the elder man said as he sat, slowly, into a comfy chair.

"Afternoon, sir," Jacob replied automatically.

The afternoon light was weak and the living room was cast into long shadows and dim gloom as the two men sat in silence. Jacob started to speak, but held his tongue as Mrs. Knight entered with the glasses of cider.

"I'll leave you two men to your work," she said as she excused herself from the room.

"What brings you here today?" Alderman Knight asked after sipping his cider.

"It's about the prisoners," Jacob replied.

"I don't know if I can help you there," Knight sighed and seemed to sink deeper into his chair. "The Council gave authority over them to Alderman Brock."

"Are we doing what's right?" Jacob asked bluntly.

"No," Alderman knight answered just as bluntly.

"But don't we have to do whatever we need to save Havilah?" Jacob pleaded. "We can't just let them kill us." Jacob's mind imagined the niggers killing and raping merrily in the streets of Havilah.

"Christ commanded us to love our neighbor and to treat him right. It's not the niggers' fault that they carry Cain's sin. They can no more help their sinful nature than a beast can choose to eat fruit." Alderman Knight closed his eyes. A great sadness overtook his features and Jacob became acutely aware of just how old the Chief Alderman truly was.

"The Lord gives us a choice," Alderman Knight continued. "We can choose to accept Christ as our savior, we can choose to live as Christians, or we can choose to follow Cain's example and lose our eternal souls."

"The niggers aren't going to show us any mercy," Jacob protested. "Anymore than a beast would."

"Is that you speaking Jacob, or Alderman Brock?" Knight asked.

"It's still the truth, isn't it?" Jacob stood from the couch and started pacing in front of Alderman Knight.

"A nigger is a nigger, I don't care if he can't help it, we have to protect ourselves from them." Jacob continued.

"The only truth is the Lord's truth, he is the light and he is the way," Alderman Knight said plainly. "Do you believe Christ would kill and torture?"

"No, sir, of course not." Jacob replied.

"Then neither should we," Knight stood from his chair. "But the council and all of Havilah are scared. They aren't listening to me anymore."

"What are we going to do?" Jacob asked as Knight started from the room.

"We should act as Christian and trust to the Lord to deliver us, but I have failed and I fear this is a test that all of Havilah will fail."

Knight shambled down the door back to the rear room of the house, leaving Jacob alone with his thoughts.

#

The fusion-plant rumbled in the background as Kyle walked through the twisted and narrow street of the old city. Quickly the founder had discovered the beasts of Havilah, compressing the first city within tightly within well guarded walls.

Kyle found the members of the interrogation team lounging on storage boxes and equipment that had been hastily moved from the new nigger-rigged jail.

“Come with me,” Kyle said to Russell. Kyle walked the two of them a short distance from the rest of the team. Kyle stopped in the shadow of cooling and reducing piping on the south side of the plant. The foul smell of the hogs in their sty not far away fought with a fresh breeze up from the bay.

“Moss isn’t a pilot,” Kyle said. Damn it, they got one of them to talk and he didn’t know anything about the flight controls.

“Now what?” Russell asked.

“We go back to work,” Kyle answered. “Concentrate on the two niggers, apparently they are the pilots.”

“The big one’s tough, could take awhile,” Russell shifted his weight back and forth.

“Do you have a better idea?” Kyle asked, fearing the answer he knew was coming.

“Just between you, me, and the fence?” Russell said softly.

“In confidence, Russell. It won’t leave this room.”

“Kill the big nigger,” Russell said boldly. “It’s scare the little one into talking.”

Damn it! Kyle knew his plan called for killing, but he didn’t know it would be contagious. Russell and the others were brutes by nature, he should have guessed that the torture would stir up deeper, darker natures.

“No one’s talking about killing anyone,” Kyle said, thankful that he kept his own plans close to his heart.

“But we’re going to have to do it,” Russell said. “They ain’t going to just leave if we ask nicely.”

“Leave the long-term problem to the Aldermen,” Kyle warned. “Let me talk to the doctors, maybe if we dope them up they’ll talk more.”

“If you’re sure,” Russell said.

“Tomorrow we’ll get started,” Kyle said, “Either with drugs or the hard way.”

Russell turned and left the office as Kyle turned and looked out at the bay.

Damn it. Somethings simply couldn't be undone. It was beginning to look like Russell, and who knows how many others on the interrogation team, were becoming contaminated by the process. Kyle bite his lower lip as he considered his options.

Russell was becoming a real predator, that was something Kyle was not willing to unleash on Havilah. There really was only one practical solution. Russell and his team were going to be required to subdue the colony ship, originally Kyle had planned to bring them home before he had the ship destroyed. It solved all the problems if Russell and the others were still aboard. That left only himself responsible. Kyle had no illusion how the other Aldermen would react. Still, it protected the people of Havilah, and that was all that mattered.

#

Jacob wondered through the streets of Havilah, dust kicking up as listlessly he kicked at the ground.

It was going to be a warm day, a day that should have been filled with happy thought and good decent hard work. Jacob stopped and looked over at the old city, the densely packed warren of buildings were just out of sight, shielded by the larger structure built since then. He could see where the niggers were held prisoner and he could hear them either. No one could. If they were doing the right thing, why did they have to hide it?

The cry of a death-angle pulled Jacob's attention skyward. It was alone bird, brightly colored in forest yellows and oranges, circling above the city. A scout looking to find something weak or wounded to lead the flock to, well he'd find nothing in the city. Jacob watched as the bird straightened it course and disappeared behind the bulk of Alderman's Hall.

Jacob looked at Alderman's Hall and started striding purposefully towards it. He'd ask Alderman Brock point blank about it. This couldn't be right, there had to be another way.

No one answered Jacob's knocks at Brock's door. Curse it! Jacob opened the door and walked on it. He'd wait for Alderman Brock, this couldn't go on and Jacob knew he'd find no peace until he found an answer.

Jacob paced back and forth in the office, time dragged like he was a kid forced to sit thought a long sermon. Frustrate, Jacob sat at Alderman Brock's desk and started looking for the plans Brock had shown him about exploring the south continent. At with that his mind

would be engaged in something they Jacob knew wasn't confusing in its morality.

The maps weren't to be found, but Jacob found himself reading a memo Brock had left in his top drawer. Jacob hadn't intended to read it, but the word plague had leaped out at him. God's grace had spared Havilah plague, Jacob read fearful that protection was now gone.

Slowly the intent of the memo, written and re-written by hand, dawned on Jacob.

It was a message Brock intended to send back to Earth, warning them of a plague that didn't exist. Yes! Jacob almost jumped out of the seat as he worked it out. That would keep Havilah safe. The people back on Earth would stay away, leaving everyone here alone. Havilah was safe!

Of course the people on the Independence would know, but that hardly mattered. They'd be busy with a new colony and not on Earth at all. Jacob sat back in the chair, breathing easier than he had in days. It was over.

The secret wouldn't last, it wouldn't work after all. The bull nigger, Daniel, had told Jacob about the inspection by people from Earth. When they found the Independence, they'd learn that the plague was a lie. It wouldn't do any good at all. When Alderman Brock arrive, Jacob knew he'd have to tell him that he read the memo, and worse tell him why it wouldn't work.

Two people knowing a secret is two too many. Alderman Brock had taught Jacob. How many times had they learned the truth of something because someone talked? A Watchman's job was so much easier because no one could keep a secret. Alderman Brock knew this.

Jacob felt a chill overtake him, even as warm sunlight stream in through the window.

The secret would be safe is everyone on the *Independence* was dead.

Oh God, it was so simple and it would work. Havilah could be safe, Havilah would be safe.

'Thou Shall Not Kill.'

Havilah would be safe, but it wouldn't be saved. Jacob stood and rushed out of the office. By the time he left Alderman's hall he was running, his feet pumping fast beneath him as he ran south, through the old city, and out into the field and low hills beyond. He didn't slow as the city dropped away from him. He didn't stop until his breath was gone and he dropped to his knees atop a hill.

To his right the land fell away to the bay, blue water, white breakers crashing down on green beaches, to the left the guarding wall

swept westward turning north in the distance, protecting the fields and homes of Havilah. Directly in front of Jacob the city rolled away from him, at his feet was the old city, the buildings here were either made from the ship that the first settlers arrived in, or of simple wood, creating a contrast of shiny metal and old weathered boards. Beyond that the dorms, communal halls, Alderman's Hall, and the Church dominated the center of the city. Furthest north were the new apartments and fields of green. It was all so beautiful, proof to Jacob that God smiled on Havilah, at least for now.

Morality held no room for compromise, Alderman Knight was right about that, but Alderman Brock was right too, a beast didn't care if you were a good person or not, if you didn't kill it it would kill you. Which Alderman did Jacob follow? Why couldn't it be both?

It wasn't Christian what they were doing, Jacob had no doubts about that anymore. Havilah had to be saved.

Jacob moved to his knees and kneeled on the hill, facing Havilah, his head low in prayer. It wasn't guidance that he prayed for; it was strength. He knew what he had to do from the first time he saw Todd screaming; just he feared doing it.

It meant exile, he knew that. After the escape he would turn himself in, he wouldn't try to hide. A man took responsibility for his actions, or he wasn't a man at all.

Jacob desperately wished this task would be taken from him. Christ had faced crucifixion Jacob only faced exile, but exile would end of his world and his life. Alone in the wild a person did not last long - but God commandments forbade killing, there were no exceptions.

Jacob finished praying, but felt no stronger than when he had started. No matter, what must be done would be done. He would have liked to lived here in Havilah, married Cindi, become a man of the community, but God had set another path before him. Jacob would not forsake the Lord's trust.

#

Christ, this wasn't a plan it was glorified suicide. Daniel kept his thoughts and doubts to himself.

"Not that I am complaining," Edward said softly, "But no one's gotten questioned today?"

"It might take them a while to work out that they don't have access to the flight controls," Todd said.

"Todd's right," Daniel agreed. "What surprises me is that they've let us stay together. Isolation help breaks people down."

"I don't think they've done this sort of thing before," Edward said.

“Probably not much conflict,” Oliver suggested. “They’re pretty homogenous.”

“Their mistake, our chance,” Daniel said. “Once we make this move, they will separate the us if the catch us again. They might be racist, but that doesn’t mean they are stupid.”

“If we make it out of this building,” Daniel continued. “Edward is everything, with him you can get home, without him, they will get the *Independence*.”

“You can fly the shuttle too,” Edward pointed out.

“I’m too much of a target, and there’s no way we can afford for me to not be in the front of the fight. I’m the only one with any fighting experience.”

“I don’t need experience,” Oliver said in a low voice. “I’ll kill them with my bear hands.”

“It’s not as easy as it sounds,” Daniel said.

“I don’t care about easy.” Oliver looked Daniel in the eye. “Just give me the fucking chance.”

“You’ll get it,” Todd said. “I want to add one thing. If someone falls, leave them.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone contemplated Todd’s advice.

“Todd’s right,” Daniel agreed. “This is everything or nothing.”

“When do we do it?” Edward asked.

“Tonight, but I’ll call when,” Daniel answered. “If I think we have a shot, I’ll signal.”

Tonight. Alive and free or worse than dead it all rode on a single throw of the dice, one chance.

#

Jacob opened the backdoor to the hospital and let himself in. The hallway was dark, but his Watchmen’s light cast a bright beam illuminating his way.

Havilah had two fully trained doctors and half a dozen more assistants, but thanks to the Lord’s grace, they were grossly under worked. The odd injury in the fields, or during construction commanded their occasional attention. Sickness was caused by parasites mainly, and those pests had been under controls for a generation. So the Hospital stood mostly deserted as Jacob moved about breaking a commandment.

Thou Shall Not Steal.

Yet, stealing was what Jacob was doing. Killing would be worse, but in the pit of his stomach a knot formed that Jacob feared would never unravel.

Working quickly, Jacob found the sleeping powder, took just enough, and then, with the black cloud of guilt over his head, stole away from the scene of the crime.

#

Perhaps they weren't going to feed anymore, Daniel feared as he sat by the door of the cell. The red disk of the sun was just vanishing under the horizon, and still there had been no sign that the guards were going to return to feed them.

Daniel considered calling out in distress, faking some illness as he had seen in video countless times, but he doubted that would work. Even if they did respond, Daniel counted it likely that they would respond in numbers. A guard or two they might have a chance against, any more than that and the plan was worse than useless.

Daniel looked across the cell to the other men. They eyes him carefully, waiting for a signal that their desperate gamble was about to be rolled.

Damn it! Where were the guards?

#

"You shouldn't be here," Cindi said as Jacob stepped into the makeshift kitchen. "There's no chaperone."

"I thought you might want some company," Jacob said as he sat on an unsteady stool. He watched as Cindi moved expertly around the tiny facility making stew and bread for the guards and prisoners.

"Feeding the guards first?" he asked.

"Only the guards," Cindi's voice was glum and guarded.

"Not the prisoners?" Jacob asked.

"Russell ordered no more food until he gets what he wants," Cindi threw a potato in the stew hard enough to splash the broth across the open range.

"That's not right," she complained. "It's not a Christian thing to do."

Jacob could see Cindi fighting back her tears.

"It's not your fault," he said.

"When Jesus asks what did I do, what am I going to say?" Cindi locked eyes with Jacob. "Am I going to ask if I am my brothers' keeper?"

"Did you tell Russell what you thought?" Jacob wanted to rush over and hold Cindi, but here, alone, it seemed improper.

"He didn't listen," Cindi answered.

"Then you did what you could," Jacob said. "You're a good Christian, God knows that already."

Jacob crossed the tiny kitchen and stood as close to Cindi as he could without touching her.

“Everything is going to be okay,” he said as she looked up into his eyes. “I promise.”

Cindi threw herself in his arms and cried on his shoulder. As she sobbed she described the screams of pain she heard from the prisoners and Jacob knew that the niggers couldn't stay another night. Havilah's soul was being tainted, before long it would as if the sons of Cain, not the sons of Able, had settled this world.

“Go outside,” Jacob suggested. “Fresh air will do you good. I'll dish out the stew.”

Cindi wiped the tears from her checks, kissed Jacob quickly on the cheek, and hurried outside.

Jacob ladled out a bowl of stew, and poured into the bowl the sleeping power. He was lying and he was stealing, but he doubted less and less the righteousness of his actions. Cindi was the soul of Havilah, as a Watchmen he was sworn to protect it from sin as much as he was sworn to protect her flesh from the beasts of the wood.

#

“Someone's coming,” Daniel whispered.

The three men climbed to the balls of their feet, ready to pounce at Daniel's signal.

The lock in the door engaged, and slowly the door swung open, but whoever opened the door stood to one side, remaining out of view.

“I'm getting you out of here,” a voice said.

Daniel leapt up to the door, reached through and dragged the person hiding on the other side into the cell.

Edward, Oliver, and Todd rushed forward, looming over their captive.

“Grab whatever it is he's carrying,” Daniel ordered. Edward grabbed the bundle from Jacob as Daniel held the him to the floor of the cell. Daniel pressed one hand firmly on Jacob's mouth, keeping him silent.

“Clothing,” Edward said as he pulled the bundle apart.

“What's your game?” Daniel asked as he lifted his hand a few millimeters.

“Let go of me, nigger,” Jacob spat.

“Watch your tongue asshole,” Oliver whispered. “What are you up to?”

“I told you; I'm getting you out of here.” Jacob said.

“Why?” Todd asked

“It's not right treating white people like this,” Jacob said. “It doesn't matter you're mingling with niggers; it isn't right.”

"There's nobody in the hall, except a sleeping guard," Edward said leaning out of the door.

"I drugged him, he won't wake up soon, but we've got to hurry." Jacob looked from Todd, to Oliver, doing his best to ignore Edward and Daniel.

"We're all going," Oliver said. "Not just the white people."

"Of course, life was fine before the niggers showed up and ruined it."

Daniel grabbed Jacob by the collar of his simple shirt and dragged him to his feet.

"Jacob," Daniel said softly. "You better thank God I'm not as evil and sinful as you think I am."

"Do we trust him?" Edward asked.

"I want you gone," Jacob answered. "Nothing will make me happier than watching your shuttle take off."

"Let's get going," Todd said to the others, Todd, Oliver, and Edward were dressed, leaving Daniel to change clothes.

"Hold him," Daniel said as he pushed Jacob into Edward's grip.

After he pulled over the top, Daniel dodged out into the hallway to check out the guard.

He did indeed look to be drugged. Daniel snatched up the guard's rifle, checked the chamber, and joined the other at the door to the cell.

"We're armed," Daniel said hefting the rifle. "What happened to 'thou shall not kill'?"

"You tainted us with your sin," Jacob replied.

"Get us out of here," Daniel said to Jacob.

"Gladly." Jacob led the four prisoners outside into the warm night air.

"We're at the south end of town," Jacob said. "If we stay heading east we'll hit the boat-bays, hardly anyone lives down at that end."

Jacob led them through the squatters' industrial section. Daniel noted the buildings as they passed them. It was clear that the settlers had a mining operation nearby, it must have been a rich vein, metal goods were abundant.

"You see that there's no way we can live together," Jacob said as he led through alleys and side streets of the squatters' settlement.

"You're not my first choice for neighbors," Oliver said.

"So you'll fly away?" Jacob asked. "Leave us alone?"

"We..." Edward started to answer, but Daniel jumped in as fast as she could.

"Yeah, we'll find somewhere else." He said as firmly as he could muster.

“Thank the Lord,” Jacob said softly.

The little group cleared a small rise between two large fabrication buildings. Horsehead bay lay out before them. In the reflected light of the gas giant, the shuttle floated placidly on the bay.

As lights switched on all over the settlement, klaxons sounding an alarm throughout.

“Shit,” Daniel said.

“This way,” Jacob said as he broke free from Edward’s grip during the surprise and hurried off down an alley. Cursing under his breath, Daniel Jacob and the others followed his lead.

“It’s the beast alarm,” Jacob said he ran down alley and twisted he way behind buildings. “It’ll rouse everyone in Havilah.”

Daniel noted that the streets were no longer dark, bright lights illuminated every square meter of the city.

“We’ve got to knock out the lights,” Daniel said.

“Where’s the local substation?” Edward demanded of Jacob. Jacob shook his head.

“Look, we can follow the main power cable,” Daniel said as he pointed to a thick bundle of cable overhead.

Edward turned Jacob about and shoved him hard in the back with her foot.

“Get moving,” he ordered.

“THE NIGGERS HAVE ESCAPED,” blared from speakers throughout the settlement. “GET YOUR RIFLE AND PROTECT YOUR HOMES.”

“There!” Edward shouted as she spotted the transformer.

Daniel held tight to Jacob as Edward worked at sabotaging the electric grid.

Electricity arched and crackled from the sabotage, and the lights went out. The air filled with the cutting smell of ozone.

“Damn,” Edward said as he took the rifle from Daniel. “I got only a bit of the city. Margaret would be disappointed.”

“Good enough,” Daniel said. “It’s dark from here to the bay.”

The group moved towards the bay again, Edward pressed the muzzle of the rifle into Jacob’s back, forcing him to lead the way out.

Jacob stopped short, the other pilling up behind him. Ahead was a large open square, fully lit, and across the far side docks and boats beckoned.

“We’re there!” Oliver shouted as he ran out past Jacob into the square, dashing across towards the bay. Damn it! Edward and Todd, clearly too wound up to think straight, joined Oliver in sprinting across the wide open lit space.

Rifle fire split the night between bursts from the klaxons. Further up the square, three men ran to intercept them.

Christ! Daniel saw delaying had cost him dearly, if he dashed now they'd cut him down. Daniel spun on his toes and sprinted back further into the darkened area of the city.

Turning down an alley between two corroding buildings, Daniel trying to throw off the pursuers. He switched directions several more times, wishing to God that he had kept hold of the rifle. Unarmed and lost, his odds of escape were dropping faster than a free falling safe.

Jacob hadn't chased after him, what was that kid up to? Helping the others escape? Helping the guards catch the nigger now that the whites had fled?

Daniel tried to push everything out of his mind, except getting back to the bay.

The buildings on the south side were older and more industrial, a jumble of pipes and ducts lead to and from the fusion power-plant. Taking advantage of the cover, Daniel started working his way back towards the bay.

No doubt Edward could hot-wire a boat, but how long would it take him? Long enough for Daniel to get there, or worse yet long enough for the guards to catch up to them. Daniel wanted to make it, but there was enough blood on on his hands, if it was him or them, Daniel knew they had to flee without him.

As if in response to his thoughts, the fusion-rocket on the shuttle lit with a roar. Daniel ducked into the shadows as a miniature sun took to the sky.

With a tear in his eye, Daniel watched as the shuttle thrustted towards orbit.

Chapter 18

Daniel moved south as quickly as he dared, towards what looked like the oldest parts of Havilah. The scream of the fusion rocket rang in his ears. They had to leave him, Daniel understood with that back in the cell, reality felt vastly different.

He was a dead man, the only thing left was exactly when and how they would kill him. No illusion of rescue sat in Daniel's mind, it was impractical and risked too much.

Daniel crawled into a concealed spot, deep in shadows beneath a tangle of cooling and reduction piping, trying not to breath too loudly..

Escape and evasion, that's the priority, then survival. Being inside the city walls heightened his chances of capture, but where to go once he dashed over the wall? Survival depended on such decisions; Daniel lacked the information to make even a good guess.

Approaching footsteps focused Daniel's mind back on his current situation, escaped prisoner. Pushing himself further under the pipes, Daniel watched the street.

Four pairs of boots walked along the street, luckily they performed only a cursory search and moved on.

Daniel tried to recall the layout of Havilah from the images Margaret's briefing, what was it, Just six days ago?

He was towards the tip of the horse's nose that outlined Horsehead bay, the wall surrounding Havilah couldn't be more that a few hundred meters south of here. So that was the quickest way out of the city, but Daniel needed supplies, everything here end looked industrial; he doubted he would find convenient survival gear to steal nearby.

Daniel crawled out from his hidey-hole, carefully checked the street, and hurried to the south.

South would take him to the wall, then he could follow it along north and west. Uncultivated land lay west of the city itself, and around to the north were the farms and the river north. That promised the best chance for escape and survival.

Damn, another searcher. It would be tough to keep from being seen until he was out of the city. He couldn't blend as native; he was the only sub-Saharan man on the planet.

Daniel ducked into the shadows of a corner and watched the searcher proceed along the street.

It was Jacob. Why was he searching? Did he know that Daniel didn't make it into the boat?

That only opened up a whole new tangle of problems. Why was Jacob searching for him? Was Jacob still trying to ease his guilty conscious, or now that the white folks had escaped was Jacob helping to catch the nigger on the loose?

Damn, his chances of survival would be something real if he had some help, but if Jacob betrayed him then Daniel knew he would never escape again. Jacob wasn't even close to finding Daniel, already Jacob had turned away and was heading east, back toward the bay. Damn it, Daniel had to decide right now, trust the kid or chance it on his own.

"Jacob," Daniel's mouth spoke an urgent whisper without Daniel realizing that he had even made a decision.

Jacob turned and looked around at hearing his name.

"Here," Daniel hissed, ready to bolt if Jacob called out for backup.

Jacob peered in Daniel's direction, spotted him, quickly looked around to be sure that no one was watching, then trotted over to him.

"This is very bad," Jacob said.

"I'm inclined to agree with you," Daniel remarked. "Are you going to turn me in?"

Daniel watched as conflicting emotion played out on Jacob's face. Daniel readied himself to another fight, but held his action.

"I can't," Jacob said at last. "They'll kill you, I'm not going to have that sin on my people."

"I wouldn't want to stain your image," Daniel snapped, he regretted uttering it even as he finished the sentence.

"That's a niggers' gratitude," Jacob replied. "Come on, let's get you hidden."

Jacob headed west, off away from the bay. Daniel struggled to keep up with him. The adrenaline ebbed out of his system and Daniel felt fatigue overtaking him.

The lights for the entire southern section of the city were still out; Edward had done a really good fine job.

Gradually the buildings became more separated, until Daniel and Jacob were standing before cultivated fields currently left fallow. Rich enticing aromas wafted up from the field. A comforting smell that reminded Daniel of his childhood in Mississippi.

“We won’t be working this field for another cycle,” Jacob explained. “You should be safe in the tool shed for a day or two.”

“After that?” Daniel asked.

“We’ll have to get you permanently out of Havilah.” Jacob trotted across the field to the tool shed. As Jacob opened the shed, Daniel noted that there wasn’t even a lock on the door.

“It’s going to be hot as hell in there,” Jacob said. “but you can take it.”

The shed measured two by three meters and was made from the native wood-analogs, farming implements hung along the wall, most of the space was taken up by covered and stored equipment. It smelt of fertilized and oil. Daniel noted a crawl-space under the roof, equally filled with stored materials. Boxed in, Daniel, again, felt trapped.

“I’m going to be keeping an eye on you nigger,” Jacob warned from the door. “Don’t even be thinking about our women.”

Jacob slammed the door shut, and Daniel listened as the young man stomped off into the distance.

Daniel dropped on the dirt floor of the shed and let his head fall forward to his knees. It wasn’t home, but it was an improvement.

#

Damn that nigger. Count on a nigger to mess everything up. Jacob fumed and cursed as he hurried back to the *Devil-Rat’s* dorm. He was going to be exiled for what he did, but damn it, he didn’t need that darkie making it worse.

He had almost called for the watch when he heard Daniel calling his name, but Alderman Knight’s words had bubbled to the top of mind. It was wrong to kill, even a nigger. God didn’t list exceptions to the commandments.

Now what was he going to do? There wasn’t a way to get the nigger up to orbit, and the ones in orbit weren’t coming for any more visits -- hopefully. What did that leave?

Brilliant lights illuminated the area around the dorm, as the *beast* alarm continued to sound. Most of the scouts remained inside, except for an emergency watch of a couple of sleepy boys at each end of the building.

“Hey, Jacob,” Troy called out as Jacob approached. “Where’ve you been?”

“Out walking,” Jacob lied, maybe the Lord would look kindly on this little lie. “Then the niggers escaped.”

“Yeah, that rocket would wake the dead.”

Jacob walked past Troy, his shoulder itching as he expected Troy to put out a hand and confront him with the truth.

Troy didn’t stop him. Inside, no one accused him of anything, and soon Jacob was in his bed in the scout leader’s room. Still, sleep did not come until the sun’s red disk began to break the horizon.

#

Edward, Todd, and Oliver were resting in the hospital as Dr. Wells and her automated nurses checked their conditions. Complementing each other’s narrative, the three men told the story of their capture, torture, and escape. Margaret saw the guilt and shame on their faces as they haltingly reported leaving Daniel behind.

“Considering the abuse,” Dr. Wells said after the story concluded. “you’re not in too bad shape -- some cracked bones but nothing completely fractured. I’ll keep you all overnight while I run some complete tests.”

“What about Danny?” Herb asked leaning against the bulkhead on the far side of the room.

“Daniel’s dead,” Margaret replied simply.

“We don’t know that,” Todd said. “He might still be on the run down there. We can’t just leave him.”

“It’s dawn in Horsehead bay now Todd, just where do you think Daniel’s going to hide?” Margaret, started pacing across the room. “As a sub-Saharan man he is not going to blend in. They’ll find him, and they’ll find him fast. If he’s lucky, they’ll kill him fast too.”

“She’s right,” Oliver agreed. “They won’t think twice about killing Daniel. He’s not even human to them.”

“But you escaped, with help, maybe someone will help Daniel too?” Catherine stood close to Todd’s bed, clasping her husband’s hand.

“Sounds like he felt guilty about beating on white people,” Margaret said. “Daniel’s a different case. Bastards.”

Silence hung in the hospital, with only the whir of the air circulating through the ship and the occasional beep of equipment to break the quiet. A chill in the air didn’t help Margaret’s mood, not did the stink of antiseptics.

“We’re not going to give up on him,” Todd said firmly. “Daniel has his faults...”

“And those are in the past,” Catherine interjected.

“But we will not, ever, leave our own to psychopaths like that.” Todd turned his head towards Captain Domingo.

“Captain,” Todd asked. “What options do we have?”

“Not very many,” Domingo sighed heavily and stepped next to Todd’s hospital bed. “We aren’t equipped for military operations nor do we have the personnel experienced at any sort of hostage rescue.”

“Well, I want options,” Todd ordered. “Sitting up here hoping for the best is not good enough.”

“Sir,” Captain Domingo responded. “We went over the options with your capture. We don’t have the resources or the knowledge to pull it off.”

“It’s a waste of time,” Margaret suggested. “If they have Daniel and haven’t killed -- which I doubt -- then it’s a matter for forcing them to release him. If not, there’s nothing we can do.”

“I’m not giving up on Daniel!” Todd’s voice echoed sharply as he shouted. “We can’t is not good enough!”

“What about the squatters?” Oliver asked, changing the subject. “How are we going to deal with them?”

“We’ll deal with that after we’ve gotten Daniel back,” Todd let go of Catherine’s hand and sat up in the bed. “When the League arrives for their eight-hundred day inspection, we can turn the whole sorry lot over for re-civilization.”

“Until then we just treat them as neighbors?” Margaret asked. “And hope that the League doesn’t give them the planet and make us the second class citizens on our own world?”

“Danny first,” Herb agreed. “Then we can work out the politics.”

“Do you really think the League would grant a character to people like that?” Catherine demanded.

“They granted ours,” Margaret countered. “As I recall they weren’t real keen on us. Don’t rely on politicians to save your dreams. That’s a fool’s path.”

“Calm down, Margaret,” Todd said. “If you want to call a formal session and have a vote, do it, but until you do that I’ll make the executive decisions, and I say Daniel first.”

“She’s right,” Oliver said from his own bed. “Daniel’s dead, I’m certain of that, and we’re doing nothing about his killers.”

“We don’t know he’s dead,” Doctor Wells said. “We should deal in facts, not fears.”

“I tried to deal in facts before,” Margaret said. “No one wanted to listen.”

Margaret spun on the balls of her feet and stormed out, before the fools provoked her into real anger, that she wanted to save for the squatters.

#

Daniel had been on the boat bay when the fighting started. The gunshots echoed painfully through the ship's passageways becoming distorted by the time they reached Daniel as he loaded the last of the *Anson's* ground craft back onboard.

The *Anson* was a small ship with a crew of just twenty-one. So it wasn't an anonymous Explorer who burst, running, onto the boat deck. It was Ruben Cook someone Daniel had know for years, they had faced unknown ecosystem and unknown bars together.

Ruben dashed only a few meters into the boat-deck before the pistol round punched through his torso, erupting in geysers of blood from his chest.

Daniel started to run to Ruben, but as the Nationalists charged into the boat deck in pursuit, Daniel ducked down and hid behind the water-skiff.

Roy, the lead Nationalist, walked calmly to Ruben and shot him twice more. Ruben's head exploded.

#

Daniel snapped awake, the air was close and oppressive. Still shaking from the nightmare, Daniel stood and tried to work the knots from his stressed muscles.

A blisteringly hot day made the tool shed more like a dry oven than a shelter, Daniel knew he would sleep no more.

Daniel occupied his hours by getting armed. If they came for him, he wanted more than just bare hands. It might not increase his chances by much, but any increase was movement in the right direction.

Daniel took a garden trowel from the wall and considered it. He could give it an edge, it wouldn't make much of a knife, but it was better than fingernails.

It wouldn't throw worth a damn, good for nothing but close-up stabbing. Still, it might make someone hesitate to take him on, and that might be enough in a pinch.

Of course, a knife wouldn't get him to orbit. A weapon was for fighting, long term survival required getting away from these assholes and getting the *Independence* to send a shuttle down for him. A bit trickier than making a sword from a plow.

It broke down into two real problems, the first communication with the *Independence*, to let them know he was still alive, not lynched from whatever passed as trees on Seclusion. Second, to find a location where the shuttle could land without endangering its crew.

Horsehead bay was not a candidate. What did that leave? The alternate landing location that lake some hundred kilometers inland, across unknown terrain, or out to sea.

Approaching footsteps brought Daniel to his guard. Gripping the trowel so tightly that his brown fingers nearly paled to white, Daniel readied himself for a fight.

“It’s me,” Jacob whispered from the other side of the door.

Daniel relaxed as the door opened and revealed Jacob in the dim light of late afternoon. Jacob stepped into the shed, closed the door and squatted down across the shed from Daniel. Jacob set out a lamp that cast a dim glow in the cramped building.

“I brought you some food,” Jacob said as he dropped a wrapped bundle in the floor. Daniel leaned forward, unwrapped the bread, and returned to his position against the wall.

“Nasty looking thing you’ve made from that trowel,” Jacob said, pointing at the crude knife.

“I’m not intending to be tortured again,” Daniel said around mouthfuls of bread.

“If we can get you out of Havilah, you won’t be.” Jacob leaned against his wall and sighed. “It’s not your fault you’re of Cain and not Able, you can’t help being sinful, we can.”

“Doing a dandy job so far,” Daniel observed.

“A nigger’s gratitude.”

“Really?” Daniel asked. “How many niggers have you met? You got a little slave pool stashed somewhere?”

“We’re not what you think.” Jacob pulled a canteen of water from his pack and tossed it to Daniel. “We don’t kill; we don’t enslave. We created Havilah to cleanse ourselves in God’s eyes, not corrupt everything we touch like you do.”

“We’re all born sinners,” Daniel answered. “if you’re a Christian you find salvation in Christ, not racism.”

“It’s not racist, it’s just the facts; you’re a descendant of Cain. I pity you, because you carry the mark, I don’t hate you for it.” Jacob’s sincerity was palatable. After a lifetime of hearing this crap, did the kid ever try to think it on his own?

“Cain slew Able, right?” Daniel asked.

“Yes.”

“And God put a mark on Cain, and on all his descendants, right?” Could the kid even see the cliff Daniel was leading him towards, or was everything just that easy for him believe?

“What about Noah?” Daniel asked.

“What do you mean?” Jacob sounded a little less certain; a wariness crept into his voice.

“What’s the story of Noah?”

“Somehow I think you’ve heard it, even if you don’t believe.”

Jacob stood up, taking the canteen back from Daniel.

“Not literally,” Daniel answered. “but I believe in God, and I do think we are all going to personally face a day of judgment.”

“Not for those who are pure of faith, the Rapture will deliver us unto Jesus Christ and our Lord God.” Jacob pulled open the door to the shed a hair, and peeked out.

“Which descendant of Cain got the free ride on the Ark, Jacob?”

Daniel asked as Jacob hurried out of the door, leaving Daniel alone in the sweltering shed.

#

Margaret watched as Oliver performed the ritual of putting his child to bed. Annie had fallen asleep hugging her father as if he were going to vanish at any moment. Margaret counted herself lucky that she and Edward had delayed starting a family. She didn’t relish the prospect of children watching what lay ahead -- but it couldn’t be helped.

“It’s so good to be home,” Oliver said as he shut the hatch to the cabin where Annie slept.

“Seclusion is home,” Margaret said. “Just stolen for the moment.”

“I’m sorry about what I said, Margaret.” Oliver collapsed into a chair. “I was wrong, and you were right.”

“I don’t give a fig about being right,” Margaret snapped. “What matters is what are we going to do about it?”

“Todd pretty much shut that down,” Oliver said. “Nothing to be done until we appeal to the League.”

Margaret pulled a chair across the floor and sat facing Oliver.

“There’s always something that can be done,” She said softly.

“Just usually that it’s too hard or too messy.”

“What are you talking about?” Oliver leaned in towards Margaret.

“Todd’s dreaming of the League coming in and taking the problem off his hands. That is not going to happen.”

“I’m listening,” Oliver said.

“One of two things will happen, and I’ll tell you why. The League doesn’t want to bring trouble home, and that what these racist murderers are, loads and loads of trouble. Option one; the League will declare it their world and send us packing back to Earth. Maybe we can raise the cash and get lucky enough to win another charter.”

"I'm tapped," Oliver admitted. "So is nearly everyone in the colony. We bet everything on a new life out here."

"I know, the same is true for Edward and me," Margaret continued. "The second option Todd would call a win, The League gives the world to us, but settles our Nazi neighbors somewhere else -- a new world of their own."

Margaret leaned back from Oliver and let the thought just hang in space for a while. Oliver's bright, she knew he would figure it out.

"That just puts off for tomorrow the trouble we're having today," Oliver said.

"Correct, this is like a tumor," Margaret said as she stood and started to pace. "A tumor on the soul of humanity. Today they're just eleven thousand idiots, stuck on some backwater moon. Who knows where it might lead if they get access to mass communication and the rest of humanity?"

Margaret stooped in her pacing and faced Oliver dead on.

"But you have an idea, or you wouldn't be here right now," Oliver said. "You don't seek advice, only assistance," Oliver said. Margaret nodded to Oliver, he could be an idealist, if this hadn't been burned it out him, but he wasn't an idiot.

"There's a rock heading towards Seclusion," she said. "You tell me how much damage it will do to the planet, and I'll tell you whether I have a plan."

Chapter 19

“It’s not a planet killer, not by any means,” Oliver said as he swung away from his PEM-generated terminal. On the bulkhead above the terminal calculations and simulations of the asteroid impacts played out in clinical neatness.

“Then we have a plan,” Margaret announced. “It is enough to wipe out the squatters?”

“More than enough,” Oliver confirmed. “We’ll still need to settle somewhere other than Horsehead bay, it will take years for the native plants to reestablish the local biomes, but there won’t be any lasting damage to the planet or to the immediate area.”

“You’re not arguing near as much as I expected,” Margaret admitted.

“I’m not arguing at all.” Oliver saved his work and let the display and terminal fade back to neutral gray.

“I’ve got Annie to think about,” he said as he stood from his seat. “My little girl will be safe from those murdering scum.”

“I agree, but the rest of the council won’t agree with us, you know.” Margaret walked over to a desk and sat on the corner. “I don’t plan to give them a choice.”

“I’m still not arguing,” Oliver said.

“Really?” This was surprising, Margaret spent the hours before this encounter preparing to argue Oliver into assisting, now he charged ahead without any prompting.

“I’m an idealist,” Oliver replied. “but I’m not stupid. There is no way to justify the existence of a mindset like these. It’s like you said, these people are the kind who make genocide happen. Well, not while I’m around, no way.”

“The rest of the governing Council doesn’t see it that way.” Margaret stood up from her perch on the desk. “They aren’t ready to take action.”

“We aren’t putting this to a vote?” Oliver asked.

“We’d lose,” Margaret replied. “I can’t do this without you, Oliver. If you pull out, we’ll just have to hope those Fascists can behave themselves.”

“I’ve already seen the answer to that,” Oliver looked at the simulation running on his monitor. “I don’t think we have any choice.”

“Right, but others on the Council don’t see it that way.” Margaret paced back and forth in the room. “We can either take action, and bring the Council along later, or we can cross our fingers and hope for the best from a bunch of murdering racists.”

“I’ll help,” Oliver said. “But they’ll be hell to pay later on.”

“Not if we do it right,” Margaret answered. “We’re a government, remember? This is war.”

Margaret turned and left.

#

“You’re a watchman,” Kyle snapped at Russell. “I would have thought that guarding a couple of niggers wouldn’t have been that difficult!”

Russell just stood there, looking sullen. Kyle bit back his next comment and forced himself to calm down. Shouting at Russell wasn’t going to improve the situation. The galling fact that it wasn’t Russell’s fault Havilah was in greater danger, it was his own.

Kyle hadn’t chosen Russell to interrogate the prisoners for his brains, in perfect hide-sight Kyle saw what a stupid decision it had been.

“We can’t help it now,” Kyle said more calmly. “Get me the colony pilots.”

Russell turned and marched out of the office.

Without the prisoners or their shuttle there was nothing to stop the niggers from destroying Havilah. Kyle knew just how easily the niggers could do it. Hell, just fly over with a shuttle and ignite the fusion engines, Havilah would be left a burnt and radioactive slag.

The only hope left now was to attack first and destroy the treat.

#

“We can’t show any weakness,” Margaret said as she slapped her palm down on the conference table. she looked to each member of the Governing Council, pausing for effect on Daniel’s empty seat.

“They don’t value life the way we do,” She continued. “And if they think we lack the guts to strike, they will attack.”

“What does this have to do with Danny?” Herb asked.

“We have to do more when we call than just ask for Daniel,” Margaret said. “We’ve got to lay out our terms and make sure that the fascists know that there is no more negotiation.”

“We’re not at war,” Dr. Wells said.

“Yes, we are,” Margaret replied. “We better start acting like it.”

“I did not...” Dr. Wells started only to be overrun by Margaret trying to speak as well. Todd cut them off, banging his gavel sharply.

“Quiet,” Todd ordered. “I understand your views, Margaret,” Todd said. “but we are not at war, and we are not going to be at war if I can help it. The order of business is what and how do we present our demand for Daniel’s return?”

“Or his body,” Margaret added.

“We’ll presume for the best,” Todd said, his eyes narrowing as he stared back at Margaret. “Until evidence says otherwise.”

“Getting Daniel back is the most important thing right now.” Edward said, gathering the attention of the entire Council. “Everything else can wait. There is no rush.”

“It can’t wait,” Margaret insisted. “Can anyone here really expect that we can deal with these thugs?”

“It’s what we have to do,” Catherine said, then she turned to her husband. “But we do need to lay down a framework for what happens next. Margaret’s not wrong about that. They have to return Daniel, and I think they have to renounce their racist ideology.”

“That kind of promise is worthless,” Margaret snapped. “They’ll be what they are.”

“A commitment like that can be enforced,” Dr. Wells pointed out. “The League can impose education and mental health treatment.”

“Fine,” Margaret surrendered. “They won’t go for it, and the League isn’t going to do anything.”

Margaret sat back and fumed while Todd had contact established with the squatters. Talk! This was not going to be resolved with talk.

Let them talk. She already had the essential data she needed from Oliver, the rest was just physics. People only made hard decisions when no other ones were left open to them. Margaret intended to make sure that there weren’t any options but hers.

“He escaped with you,” she heard Alderman Knight plead.

“He did not,” Todd insisted. “Daniel Diego is still in your settlement. We will hold Havilah responsible for his health and safety.”

“We truly do not know where he is,” Knight replied.

“Find him, and keep him safe,” Todd instructed. “In addition to Daniel’s safe return we require that you renounce your racism.”

“We can not deny the Lord’s truth,” Knight protested.

“The clock is running, alderman.” Todd switched off the radio with an angry jab at the controls.

#

Jacob knew needed help to get Daniel out of Havilah. Jacob had racked his brain all day, but nothing occurred to him, not a single idea or inspiration.

“What’s eating you?” Brian asked as they walked along the northern wall.

Even with a wall three feet thick and ten feet high they couldn’t take anything for granted. Everyday pairs of men walked the wall every morning and evening, making sure that it was in good repair and that the beasts hadn’t discovered a new weakness.

“Nothing,” Jacob lied. He lied a lot lately, besides exile, doing the right thing seemed to involve a lot of sin. If he was doing the right thing.

“Wrong,” Brian said. “you’re bugged by something, and it isn’t something little.”

“You don’t want to know,” Jacob said. They stopped, and Jacob unfolded their portable ladder setting it against the wall.

With practiced ease Jacob and Brian scrambled up the ladder to the top of the wall.

“Be that way,” Brian said. “But you know you want to tell me.”

Jacob said nothing and bent down to examine the defenses atop the wall. The spikes were in place, and the wire was still sharp. Here and there were spots of dried blood indicated where *beasts* had tried to find a way through.

“Is it about the niggers?” Brian asked as he climbed down the ladder. Brian held the ladder steady as Jacob climbed down himself.

“It’s not your fault they escaped.” Brian folded the ladder and hefted across his shoulder as the two proceeded to the next spot. Jacob said nothing as they walked.

“It’s Russell who going to have to answer to the Aldermen, not you. You’re in the clear.”

#

“The big bull nigger is still here?” Alderman Mercer asked.

“That’s what they are claiming,” Alderman Knight gave the rest of the Aldermen a quick summary of his conversation with Todd Moss.

“We have to find him,” Kyle offered. “He’s the only leverage we’ve got to hold them off.”

“What good will that do?” Mercer whined. “You heard their demands. They know we’re not going to renounce our Lord. Today or tomorrow what difference does it make when they strike?”

“It makes a difference,” Kyle snapped. “It’s make a difference in how well prepared we are for this war.”

“We do not make war,” Knight stated flatly.

“We had better start, or they are going to eradicate us. Anyway, there’s more,” Kyle said.

The rest of the Aldermen were silent as Kyle gathered his thoughts. The large chamber of the Alderman’s Hall seemed to echo silence back at them as he waited.

“I think the niggers had help escaping,” Kyle said.

The Aldermen exploded into a flurry of shouts and questions. Kyle leaned back and waited until Chief Alderman Knight a regained order.

“It’s too convenient that Paul was asleep at the very instant the prisoners made their break,” Kyle said. “I had an inventory of hospital done this morning. There are drugs missing.”

“Someone helped the niggers escape?” Mercer’s voice was high and cracked as he spoke.

“I think so,” Kyle said. “I don’t know who, yet, but I will find out.”

“That doesn’t address the immediate concern,” Knight said. “We have to produce Daniel Diego.”

“We should call a meeting of the entire city,” Alderman Brown suggested. “Someone must know something.”

#

“I need control of the Von Newman routines,” Margaret said entered Herb’s office.

Margaret looked about with approval at Herb’s office, it was unlike the man, yet reflected his skill perfectly. Every display showing off an engineering achievement from his career, proceeded in a sensible and orderly manner. Herb might have been loud and expansive, his office was controlled and plain.

“Sure thing,” Herb turned to the monitor and control station on his desk surface. “Isn’t much left for you to do. The fusion plant is on-line, and the reaction tanks are juiced up.”

Margaret looked around Herb’s office. Projections for his construction projects covered the walls, leaving very little space that had not been converted to a display of some sort or another.

“I’m going to miss working on projects like these,” She said sweeping her hand towards his displays.

“Always could use another Engineer,” Herb offered.

“I’m going to be too busy with Seclusion’s vital infrastructure,” Margaret said. “but there’s nothing like grand zero-gee engineering.”

"I wouldn't argue with you there," Herb tapped out a few final command into his terminal, then turned back to Margaret.

"It's all yours," he said.

"Thanks," Margaret got up to leave, but Herb continued speaking.

"Do you think Danny's alive?" he asked.

"No," Margaret said. "Even if he didn't get recaptured, it's only a matter of time."

"Bastards," Herb said. "I can't until the League loads them up on a prison ship. I can't believe that people are still allowed think that way."

"Believe me they do." Margaret crossed back to Herb's desk. "But do you really think the League is going to ship them back? I don't."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, the League may make an example of few, but even that much is iffy, Herb." Margaret sat on the edge of Herb's desk and looked him in the eye. "They could also recognize that squatter colony, make it sovereign."

"They'd never do that!" Herb stood up from his seat. "That bunch, a government?"

"They gave those monarchists a colony, didn't they?" Margaret got off the table and stalked Herb around the room. Herb would never agree to taking the action required, but once it was a done deal, then he might very well sign on.

"The League isn't a very strong central government," Margaret explained. "It would be a lot easier to recognize the idiots than to deal with the fallout of bringing them home to Earth."

"I still doubt it, Margaret. People clamoring for a king isn't the same thing as racists out to kill everyone else. These people are more like terrorists than a government."

"I agree, and if we're lucky they'll be treated like terrorists." Margaret turned and started for the door.

#

Nearly everyone in Havilah was in the church. A few were watchmen patrolled the streets, and a few people remained in the fields, but aside from that all eleven thousand were sitting in the pews of their grand central church.

Jacob sat next to Brian, the rest of barracks 005 sat quietly behind them; the entire church was quiet.

"This won't take long," Alderman Brock said as he strode to the pulpit, his voice issuing from the speakers, echoing off the high stadium walls of the church. The rest of the Aldermen gathered in seat around the pulpit.

“Everyone needs to be on guard,” Brock continued. “because the nigger Daniel Diego is still inside our walls.”

A collective gasp ran through the congregation. A thousand hushed voices started up in conversations throughout the church.

“Quiet!” Brock ordered. “I’m not finished.”

The crowd settled down at Brock’s order.

“We have to find the escape prisoner,” Brock continued. “The safety of Havilah depends on it. The rest of the Aldermen and I believe the prisoners had help in escaping.”

The crowd was now speaking and yelling, not simply conversing with themselves in hushed tones.

“Quite, everyone please be quiet” Brock said loud and firm.

“Someone out there knows who helped the niggers escape. Someone out there knows that their friend or friends have been acting strange the last two days. Now that someone knows why. The Aldermen are calling on you to come forward, to stand for the truth.”

Alderman Brock returned to his seat and Chief Alderman Knight rose, slowly, and took the pulpit.

“Friends,” Alderman Knight said in his soothing yet firm voice.

“This is a time of testing. As the Lord tested Abraham, and as he tested the Israelites, he is testing us. Do not act rashly, for the quick voice is Satan’s voice, a voice of lies and deceit. Be honest and true and we will have nothing to fear for the Lord will protect us.”

Jacob saw that Brian watched him intently.

Chapter 20

The vast communal dinning hall, one of a dozen, buzzed with voices and activity. Jacob sat like a rock in the middle of this busy breakfast, his food untouched.

“Talk to you in private?” Brian asked walking up to Jacob’s table.

“Sure,” Jacob picked up his plate from the table. neither boy spoke as Jacob bussed his tray at the rear of the dinning hall.

Outside the sun was shining and a sea-breeze brought the sharp tang of salt to Jacob’s nose as they walked back to the Dorm. People walked the streets of Havilah as they always had, but now Jacob noticed, they walked in twos and threes. Jacob knew that Daniel was hiding in the tool shed, but everyone else seemed to expect the big bull nigger to charge from every shadow.

Wordlessly Jacob and Brian enter the dorm and proceeded back to Jacob’s private room. A perk Jacob earn for shepherding the young boys of the dorm.

With the door securely closed, Jacob sat heavily on his bed.

“Did you help the niggers escape?” Brian asked directly.

“Yes.” Jacob sighed as the burden of the secret lifted off his soul. There would be hell to pay, and he always knew that, but keeping secrets from your best friend was a special kind of hell.

“Jesus Christ,” Brian said.

“Don’t blaspheme,” Jacob advised.

“Don’t blaspheme?” Brian mocked. “Good Lord, you help the niggers escape and you tell me not to blaspheme?”

“Yes, and until you turn me in I am still your troop leader, so if you’re going to blaspheme, make sure you don’t do it around me.” Jacob threw himself back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling.

"I'm not going to turn you in," Brian said. "I don't know what I'm going to do, but Russell can go kiss a beast for all I care."

Brian pulled a chair around and sat across from Jacob at the table.

"But why did you do it?"

"Come on, Brian, you saw what was happening." Jacob leaned in across the table towards Brian. "What was going in there was wrong, and it would have ended in killing; you know it."

"But you're going to get exiled if you get caught," Brian pleaded.

"Not if, when," Jacob said. "After I get Daniel home, I'm turning myself in."

"You can't do that. You won't last a second out there without help." Brian's voice cracked with emotion.

"I have to. It's the right thing to do, and I'm not going to pretend I didn't do it." Jacob sat back up.

"The nigger that got left behind," Brian said.

"Yeah, the nigger I've got hid." Jacob closed his eyes. "Damn, trust a nigger to screw a thing up!"

"Alderman Brock and Russell will turn Havilah upside-down looking for him," Brian observed.

"I know. I hoped I could find a way to get him back before they found out he was still here."

"That's yesterdays sermon, we got to figure what to do today," Brian said.

"Me, not we," Jacob replied.

"I'm not leaving you to hang alone on this." Brian got up and started pacing the room. "Anyway I know too much to pretend I don't. So, I'm going to help you."

"No, I can live with sending myself going into exile, but I'm not going to get you exiled too," Jacob said forcefully.

"When they ask as trial, I'm going to tell the truth, Jacob, you can't stop me from doing that." Brian walked over to Jacob, leaned down, his hands on the table. "So either I help you and get exiled, or I admit I knew and didn't turn you in and get exiled. You don't have a say in it."

"God damn it, this isn't a game."

"Don't blaspheme," Brian smirked.

"Fine, have it your way," Jacob relented. "I don't know what to do."

"Well the first thing is to get that nigger out of Havilah before he gets found and fingers you for helping him." Brian sat back down across from Jacob.

"I don't think he would," Jacob said. "He was pretty tightlipped."

"That was protecting his own skin," Brian pointed out. "He'd give you up in a second. You can't trust him, Jacob, he's a nigger."

"You're right," Jacob agreed. "but how do we get him back up to orbit?"

"That's not the problem," Brian said. "We find a way to get him out of Havilah, the other niggers can come and get him. We need to find somewhere safe to stash him, somewhere where it will be awhile before Russell and the other think to look there."

"It'd have to be outside the wall," Jacob said. "Someplace far away and safe from *beasts*."

"Where is he now?" Brian asked.

"In the tool shed on the south field," Jacob answered. "It's fallow right now so no one's going there."

"We better move fast," Brian said.

"How about the mine?" Jacob asked.

"That's pretty good," Brian said. "It's not far from the sea, so if we can get them to come get him, they wouldn't have to land near Havilah at all."

"It's thirty-five miles to the mines." Jacob said.

"We'll take a tractor, hide the darkie under some equipment and drive up there." Brian stood up and looked at Jacob.

"No time like the present," Jacob said as he joined Brian.

#

The conspirators met in Oliver's lab, safe from prying eyes with the newly minted privacy of their colony. Margaret sat at the terminal, on the bulkhead in front of her three displays projected the asteroid's current trajectory, the official one, and their own, secret, trajectory.

"Fusion plant is operating at one hundred and five percent," Margaret reported.

"One-oh-five," Oliver confirmed from next to Margaret. "Reaction tanks are filled, and flow is uninterrupted."

"We are go for burn," Margaret sat back from her terminal.

"What's the radiation reading?" Margaret asked Oliver.

"Seventeen hundred and fifty rad," Oliver answered. That was well above the lethal dose-50 of five hundred rad. The fusion plant and all of its associated controls were blanketed safely under a lethal shield of radiation. No one would be diverting this asteroid again.

"Burn in fifteen seconds," Margaret announced.

Fifteen seconds and this threat would be behind them. Oh not that the asteroid would reach the white-supremacist colony in fifteen

seconds, impact wouldn't be for another thirty-seven days, but the result was inevitable.

"Commencing burn," Margaret said.

"How long?" Oliver asked.

"I've throttled back the exhaust, five hours. We're almost done."

"Almost?" Oliver asked.

"Right now there's nothing to stop the systems for being programmed for another burn." Margaret tapped a few commands into her terminal.

Margaret's command would have the automated machinery destroying the transceiver station as soon as the burn was completed. She would have liked to have had the fusion plant and motor destroyed as well,, but there wasn't time to circumvent the safety locks.

"It's done," Margaret said. They had crossed the Rubicon, no matter what happened, Seclusion was going to be safe.

#

"I don't have the cab ready," Gene said as he whipped grease from his hands. "No one told me anyone was going outside."

"We're getting some bad reading from the mine," Brian lied. "We gotta check it out right away."

"I wouldn't ride through the wood without a cab," Gene offered.

"We had a hunt last week," Jacob said. "The beasts probably have moved on for a while."

"You going to bet your skin on that?" Gene asked.

"Got no choice," Jacob replied. "I have to check out the mine."

"Ok," Gene said. "Take number three," Gene pointed to a tractor on the far side of the shop. "I just topped of her supplies."

#

"Where's Jacob?" Kyle asked. None of the watchmen answered, having found the sky, or their shoes suddenly much more interesting.

"I asked a question," Kyle said.

"No one's seen him since breakfast," Philip offered from the back of the formation.

Kyle clasped his hand behind his back and paced in front of the assembles Watchmen. Damn, this was no good at all.

"We got to find that nigger," Kyle said loudly. "I want every place searched. He's got to be here somewhere."

"What if he went over the wall?" George asked.

"For Havilah's sake you better hope he didn't," Kyle answered.

"He's no good to us a beast food."

"We'll find him," Russell said.

“You better,” Kyle agreed. The dozen Watchmen began to disperse to start their search.

“If you see Jacob,” Kyle said grabbing Russell by the arm, “You send him straight to me.”

“You think he had something to do with this?” Russell asked.

“I didn’t say that,” Kyle answered, even as his own suspicions grew. “You just send him over.”

Kyle let go of Russell’s arm and stomped off into Alderman’s Hall.

#

“Don’t panic,” Jacob’s voice was a whisper barely audible through the door of the shed. “I’ve got a friend with me.”

The door to the shed opened; Jacob entered with another young man.

“That bastard was there when I was being tortured,” Daniel said trying not to shout. Daniel’s eyes fixed on a small automatic pistol at Brian’s waist.

“But I didn’t do any of it,” Brian said.

“You didn’t say a word to stop it either,” Daniel turned to Jacob. “He was part of it, don’t trust him.”

“If he was going to turn us in, he would have done it last night,” Jacob explained. “He’s known at least that long that I’ve been hiding you.”

“You’re not good at showing appreciation are you, nigger?” Brian asked.

“My name is Daniel Diego,” Daniel stood up to his full, nearly two-meters, of height. “I’ll ask you to call me that.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Jacob said. “We’ve got to get you out of Havilah; the Watchmen know you’re still here.”

“Damn,” Daniel said.

“You already are,” Brian remarked.

“As long as I’m here I am,” Daniel said. “So how do we get me out of the city, and where am I going?”

“We have a mine north of here,” Jacob explained. “We can hide you there until we can get you back up and orbit.”

“That’s about sixty kilometers, a bit long for a hike,” Daniel said.

“We’ve got a tractor outside,” Jacob explained.

“Just stay in here until we’ve got it loaded,” Brian said. “And then we’ll stash you under the equipment.”

Brian opened the door and started out of the shed, but quickly closed the door again, careful not to slam it.

“Russell,” he said to Jacob.

“Damn,” Jacob cursed.

"We got to hide you two," Brian said.

"Us?" Jacob asked.

"Yes, both of you. If Russell sees you here he'll tear this shed apart for sure." Brian looked left and right, panic edging into his movements.

The shed was a small one room affair, with racks for the equipment, and a few counters and shelves.

"Up there," Daniel said pointing to the shed's tiny rafter space. Daniel grabbed a black tarp off a plow and climbed into the rafters.

"Come on," Daniel urged as Jacob watched him climb.

"Go," Brian agreed, "We don't time for anything better."

Jacob climbed into the rafters with Daniel and lay next to him, as Daniel wrapped the tarp around the two of them and rolled them both into the crevice where the roof met the wall of the shed.

It was dark here and maybe, even if the asshole looked up, he might not see the tarp against the dark background.

Inside the tarp it was hot and the air was as oppressive as the blackness that engulfed them. Daniel could feel Jacob's breath, hot, fast, and shallow against his face. Daniel fought to keep his own breathing calm and level.

Daniel felt panic growing. In the darkness his mind he was on the mess deck of the *Anson* again. Daniel bit his lip as screams echoed from his memory..

"Hi Russell," Brian said from the door below them.

"What are you doing in there, Brian?" Russell asked. Daniel trembled as memories of abuse and torment collided with memories of the *Anson*. Daniel felt his legs starting to shake as his body readied itself for fight or flight.

"Just getting some stuff for the north field," Brian answered easily. "What's up?"

"Searching for the nigger," Russell's voice got louder, and through a tiny slit in the tarp Daniel could see him striding into the shed.

Russell looked around the shed, disgust visible on his face.

"Smells like something died in here," Russell said.

"I think something did," Brian agreed.

Russell walked back and forth in the shed, peering into storage areas and looking under tables. Daniel wished for just one minute alone with the torturing bastard.

A nearly silent gasp from Jacob brought Daniel's attention back to the rafters.

Jacob's eyes widened as he watched a small hairless creature crawl slowly between himself and Daniel. The creature looked vaguely

reptilian, excepting that it possessed six legs, all radiating out from a central location on its spine. The creature's eyes were large and round, but comprised entirely of pupil, the eyes were set deep in a flat piggish face. Riveting Daniel's attention was the creature's sharp, triangular teeth, two rows, one in front of the other on both the top and bottom jaws.

Jacob froze, Daniel doubted the boy was even breathing as the ugly thing walked in the tiny space between the two bodies. Daniel held motionless, trusting that Jacob was not simply scared of small, ugly things.

Below them Russell continued to search the shed, turning over equipment that wouldn't hide Annie, much less Daniel.

The creature reached Daniel and Jacob's faces, and paused, sniffing the air between them. Daniel moved his hand very slowly up from his waist and prepared to grab the thing, Jacob, with barely any movement at all, shook his head 'no'.

"Nothing here," Russell said.

"It's not good have a nigger on the loose," Brian commented.

"Never is." Russell stopped at the door and gave the shed one last sweep with his eyes. "but we'll find him."

The creature turned to face Daniel, its ugly teeth just millimeters away from his nose. Daniel saw its muscles tense as it prepared to attack.

With a quick and efficient strike, Jacob speared the creature through the back with a large knife from his belt. Daniel looked down past the dead thing, through the slit in the tarp, to Russell standing not two meters below them.

"What was that?" Russell asked.

"I don't know," Brian said looking around.

Daniel bit his lip as Russell walked back into the shed, peering left and right for the source of the noise.

"You seen Jacob?" Russell asked he headed back to the door.

"Not since breakfast. Maybe you should ask Cindi."

"I think I might," Russell turned and walked out of the shed.

Daniel continued to hold his breath for another ten-seconds or so, then he finally blew it out in one long exhale.

"That was too damn close," Daniel said.

"We were lucky," Jacob agreed. Jacob sat up as far as he was able in the cramped angle where the roof met the wall, throwing the tarp off them. He pulled the knife, with the creature still stuck to the blade.

"What is it?" Daniel asked as he followed Jacob in climbing down to the floor of the shed.

“A devil rat,” Jacob answered. “Those spines are poisonous. Probably wouldn’t have killed you, but it’s a nasty time to get stuck by one.”

“We were both almost exiled just now,” Brian said as he sat on a hand tractor next to the door.

“Better than being hanged,” Daniel said.

“The Lord said ‘Thou shall not kill’,” Jacob Said. “We uphold the Lord’s commandments.”

“Wish more people did,” Daniel agreed.

“Let’s get moving,” Jacob said quickly as he got up and started loading equipment into his arms. “Gabbing here all day will get us caught.”

Daniel dropped back from the doorway as Brian and Jacob loaded a small trailer with equipment and tarps. When they had finished, Jacob climbed aboard the small tractor pulling the trailer.

“It’s clear, you better get in now,” Brian said from the driver’s seat.

Daniel moved quickly from the shed to the trailer and burrowed deep under the equipment piled on the trailer. Brian started to climb aboard the tractor.

“You have to stay here,” Jacob advised. “See if you can keep anyone from chasing after us.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Brian asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Jacob said as he patted the rifle on the seat next to him.

“Okay,” Brian agreed. “See you at the mine.”

“Jacob,” Daniel said from his hiding spot. “We had radios with us when we were captured. If you can get one of those, I can call for a shuttle to get me. Otherwise, I’m stuck here.”

“I already have it, nigger,” Jacob said. “Settle in it’s going to be a long drive.”

“My name is Daniel,” Daniel said as the tractor jerked into motion.

Jacob didn’t answer, but just turned his back on Daniel and started the tractor. Daniel crawled under the tarp covering the equipment and tried to settle for the trip.

The dust from the dirt roads of the settlement penetrated the equipment and tarp, making the air in Daniel’s hiding hole stuffy and suffocating. As they bounced along the roads the metal bed of the trailer slammed into Daniel’s spine, while simultaneously throwing him into the equipment piled above him. For an escape that wasn’t getting above twenty kilometers an hour, Daniel felt pretty banged around.

Jacob drove northwest for nearly thirty minutes, then turned back to the east, for the main settlement. Passing between the buildings Daniel got the best view of the people and the settlement since his over flight.

The people went about their business much like any other colony that Daniel had visited in his service in the Explorer Corps. They built and maintained their buildings, grew crops, harvested, and prepared the food -- all this Daniel watched as he was spirited out of the city.

Towards the center of the city, they passed the barracks where the colonist lived. Up close, Daniel could see that some were traditional style barracks, but other buildings that Margaret had assumed were barracks were more like apartments. From his hidden vantage point, Daniel watched wives working with laundry and babies, as they had on countless colonies and on Earth for countless centuries.

The traffic of the city was foot traffic, which dodged out of the way of the tractor as it drove north. All around them Daniel saw colonists working on their livelihood, building a place for themselves, and he knew nurturing the vile specter of racism. Daniel found it hard reconcile the tranquil and productive people he saw around him with the pain and torment he had suffered in their custody.

Eventually, the buildings gave way to the green of their cultivated fields. The rich smell of the crops and the fertilizer took Daniel back to when he was a boy, growing up in rural Mississippi. The small town he lived as boy had modern connivence like PEM-coated buildings, and the safety of Guardian Angels, but the fields and woods, in their hot humid summers, had changed very little over the centuries.

Farming was hard work, and these people were doing it with less automation that Seclusion planned to use. Still, as Daniel watched the fields roll by, he saw people happily at work, boys eyeing the girls as they worked together, adults chaperoning both, here and there hymns sang out on voices raised to heaven.

“Where are you going, Jacob?” A voice called out.

“Heading to the mines,” Jacob answered. “Thought I would check it out in case that nigger ran up that way, and there’s work to be done just the same.”

“You be careful,” the voice answered. “That nigger’ll cut your throat as soon as look at you.”

“I will be,” Jacob answered.

The fields passed behind them, and the tractor was soon driving over untamed land, rich with red, yellow, and orange native plants.

“We’re almost to the wall,” Jacob said.

From the left and the right Daniel saw the wall converging ahead of them. The razor wire and spikes glistened in the sunlight atop the green concrete wall.

“Morning Jacob,” the guard at the wall called out.

“Good Morning, Jim,” Jacob stopped the tractor and climbed off. He stretched his arms, reaching high into the air. “Lord, it’s a lovely morning.”

“Unless your standing out in the sun,” Jim replied.

“Don’t fret it, Jim. We all take our turn on the wall. Any sign of *beasts* today?” From his hidden vantage point, Daniel lost sight of his benefactor as Jacob climbed the concrete wall.

The rest of the conversation was barely audible, and none of it was intelligible. Daniel waited in the trailer, the heat grew, and the air seemed to flow like molasses. Daniel lay back trying to relax, without sacrificing awareness. If the gate guard, Jim, decided to search the trailer, it would be a fight and he would have to be ready to spring into action.

The sound of footsteps grew louder and closer as Daniel listened to Jacob and Jim approach.

“Going out alone?” Jim asked. Daniel held his breath as Jim walked up to the trailer, and leaned on it. The guard, Daniel tried not to think of him by name, dehumanizing him in case of a fight occurred, supported himself with a hand on the trailer while he whipped sweat from his forehead.

“Someone’s got search the mines.” Jacob said. “Anyway after a hunt, the way should be clear for the next several weeks.”

The guard moved his rifle from his left side to his right. Was he getting ready to pull back the tarp? Daniel searched with his hands, but his only weapon was a length of wood. Wood versus firearms, not good odds at all.

“I heard niggers are as strong as demons,” the guard confided. “Guess it’s ‘cause they are so much like animals.”

“The Lord will protect me, Jim.” Jacob climbed aboard the tractor and restarted it. “Go ahead and open the gate for me.”

The guard started towards the wall then stopped and looked directly back to the trailer. Daniel ducked his eyes down low; praying his dark skin would make it harder to spot him through the narrow opening as the guard approached the trailer.

“Your tarp is loose,” the guard shouted to Jacob over the engine of the tractor.

A stick it would have to be. Daniel gripped the crude club tight and readied for a fight.

The tarp moved, came down low, and then tightened as the guard secured it at the rear of the trailer.

“There,” The guard said, his voice heavily muffled by the tarp. “Nothing’s going to climb in and surprise you.”

The trailer lurched as the tractor started moving again. Daniel lay still and let the club roll away from his fingers. Pins and needles shot through his fingers as the blood returned to his digits. That was close, too damn close.

“Come on out,” Jacob said as he rolled back the tarp.

Daniel sat up.

Woods stretched out in every direction. Falling away behind them, the simple dirt road that connected the settlement with its mining operation. In the distance Daniel could just see the green of the security wall peeking above the yellow and reds of the natural fields of Seclusion.

He was out of the city.

Chapter 21

The Aldermen crowded into Peter astronomy lab. What had been a hobby for Peter and a minor use to Havilah had become critical. Peter indicated the display to the Aldermen as they tried to close in enough in the small room so that they could all see.

“What are we looking at?” Knight asked the astronomer.

“See that radio spike?” Peter pointed at spike in the graph currently on the display. “That’s not natural. I’d say it’s fusion rocket firing.”

“Are they leaving?” Alderman Mercer asked as he tried to push forward past the rest of the Aldermen. Kyle planted himself firmly blocking Mercer’s way. Peter’s lab was already too cramped by the dozen Aldermen, Mercer would just have to learn his place.

“It’s not coming from their ship,” Peter said. “It coming from beyond Havilah’s orbit, but inside Goliath’s system.”

“Just tell us what it means,” Kyle asked. Daniel was still on the loose, there wasn’t time to waste on whatever was happening in orbit.

“They’re moving an asteroid,” Peter said. “They might be using it as a weapon.”

“Sweet Jesus,” Kyle swore.

“Don’t swear,” Knight said. “Are you saying that the niggers are going to drop an asteroid on us?”

“We don’t know,” Peter said as the Aldermen broke into excited chatter.

“Well you’ve got to know!” Kyle stepped up until his face was nearly touching Peter’s small round one. “We can’t wait until it hits, damn it!”

“Calm down, Alderman Brock,” Knight said. “Peter, when will you know?”

“Right now they are still applying thrust.” Peter shrugged his shoulders. “It all depends on how long they continue to do so.”

Peter turned away from the Aldermen and tapped at the controls of his display. The projected orbit of the asteroid appeared on the display, an angry red broken line. The line curved inwards towards Havilah, just shy of intersecting the small moon.

“They’re bringing it closer,” Peter suggested. “That’s a fact. They could be just planning on mining it in orbit.”

“What would happen if it hit?” Kyle asked.

“Depends on where it hit,” Peter replied. “It’s not large enough to change climate, so most of Havilah will be unaffected.”

“What if it lands here?” Kyle insisted. “What if land right in our bay?”

“We’re dead and so is anyone within a hundred miles.” Peter answered.

#

“Where’s my radio?” Daniel asked from the trailer.

“I have it,” Jacob said without taking his eyes of the crude road he was following.

“Let me have it.” Daniel crawled to the front of the tractor. He kept to his hands and knees, even though the tractor moved at a crawl, the uneven ground made the trailer an unstable platform.

“Not until we get to the mine,” Jacob said. “Once Alderman Brock knows the radio is gone, he’ll start trying to detect any stray broadcasts. I’m not doing all this for nothing.”

“I need to let people know I am safe,” Daniel argued. “People might over-react.”

#

The Governing Council of Seclusion took their seats around the large conference table. Margaret looked at each person, there was tension in their faces, but she doubted the secret of the asteroid was out yet.

“We’re getting an urgent signal from Havilah,” Todd announced as he took his seat at the head of the table. “Hopefully it is good news.”

“Are you there?” Knight’s voice said from the center of the table.

“We are,” Todd replied. “Is Daniel Diego safe?”

“We are still searching for him,” Knight answered. “We pray that he has not gone beyond the wall.”

“We want a little more from you than prayer,” Todd said coolly. Margaret watched as the rest of the Council nodded along with Todd’s reply.

"We are concerned," Knight continued. "About the asteroid you are moving. Do you intend to bring it into orbit?"

"No," Edward answered honestly, even as Margaret tried to signal him to be quiet. "We are putting it safely away from the gas giant system."

The speaker in the table went silent. Margaret resolved controls in the tabletop before her and quickly muted the conference room from the radio circuit.

"We need to talk," she announced.

Todd opened his mouth to speak, but the radio returned to life.

"Mr. Moss," Knight said. "That asteroid is getting closer not further from Havilah."

Todd removed the mute from the radio with his own controls and replied, "Your first priority is finding Daniel. After he is released to us alive and unharmed, we'll discuss other matters."

Todd tapped the control panel violently, shutting off the radio.

"Margaret," he said as he locked a stare in her direction. "What the hell is going on?"

"What had to happen," Margaret answered. From the corner of her eye she watched as Edward created a set of controls. It was all out of the bag, but that didn't matter. There wasn't a thing that anyone could do about it now.

A holographic display leapt into existence above the table. The gas giant, Seclusion and the asteroid all represented with bright green icons. Moving away from the asteroid, the red line of its projected orbit.

"That's not the orbit I programmed," Edward stammered. "That rock is way off course."

"No," Margaret announced. "It'll be on course when the burn is completed in just under an hour and the danger from the murdering, racist thugs will be over."

The council exploded in a fury of shouting and questions, Margaret sat back in her chair refusing to show any emotion at all.

After several attempts, Todd regained control of the meeting that.

"What the hell do you think you were doing?" Todd demanded.

"Saving Seclusion," she answered. "This Council would have debated, dithered, and negotiated with these murdering scum until we were on the receiving end of an asteroid, not them."

"What about Daniel?" Catherine asked. "He's still down there."

"Daniel's dead," Margaret crossed her arms defiantly. "Accept it."

"You don't know that," Dr Wells said softly.

"Edward," Todd said turning to the colony's chief pilot. "Did you know about this?"

“No,” Edward turned and fixed a cold stare at Margaret. This was a price Margaret had hoped she would not have to pay, but she had committed herself.

“We didn’t have a choice,” Oliver said breaking the pregnant silence.

“There is always a choice,” Dr. Wells added.

“Yes, there was,” Margaret said sharply. “We could chose between safety for ourselves and our children or the threat of genocide.”

“Little lady, you’ve just committed genocide.” Herb stood up from the Council table. “While the rest of you talk, I’m going to redirect that thing.”

“You can’t,” Margaret said.

“What do you mean we can’t?” Herb loomed over the conference table like an asteroid himself.

“The transceiver has been destroyed. The only way to fire the rocket now is manually.” Margaret stood and moved closer to Herb, forcing the big man to retreat.

“And the fusion plant on that asteroid has no shielding,” Margaret added. “At seventeen hundred and fifty rad, no one is going to operate it manually.”

“You thought this through, didn’t you?” Dr. Wells said.

“Absolutely. We are committed now, the only choice left for the Council is to validate it.” Margaret sat back down and turned to each member of the Council as she spoke.

“They are terrorists, and we have a sovereign right and duty to protect ourselves,” she explained. “As a sovereign government we have the legal right to make war on anyone who declares their war on us -- we don’t have to wait for approval from the League in any emergency.”

“It’s that easy is it?” Catherine asked. “Take a vote and kill ten thousand people.”

“Ten thousand terrorists,” Oliver added.

“You weren’t there Catherine,” Oliver continued. “They were going to kill Todd, and me and Edward, just as they have killed Daniel. Do you think for a moment it would have stopped there?”

“I don’t like...” Catherine started.

“I hate it!” Oliver exploded. “but by God, Annie is going to be safe.”

Oliver looked at each member of the Council in turn.

“They haven’t given us a choice,” Oliver pleaded. “So let’s not waste time fighting among ourselves. Margaret has presented us with a rational and reasonable course of action. I move we make our declaration of war official. Afterwards, we can pretty up the timeline.”

“Lie, you mean,” Catherine accused.

“Yes, lie,” Margaret said. “I’ll resign from the Council afterward, but the secret of what we did, stays here, and Seclusion survives, free from the threat of genocide.”

“And what about Daniel?” Todd asked.

“Daniel is dead,” Margaret said. “If they had him, alive, he’d be bait in a trap for us.”

“I won’t be railroaded,” Todd said. “And I’m not going to let you railroad the Council either. Any vote on war is going to wait. Meeting adjourned.”

#

Daniel rode the trailer, no longer buried under farming equipment, watching the forest pass by at a snail’s pace of fifteen or twenty kilometers an hour. There was a passenger seat on the tractor, but not for sub-Saharans, Jacob had made that clear. Jacob might feel that killing Daniel was a sin, but that didn’t make up for Daniel’s deep brown skin.

Still, this was better than the dark, oppressive shed Daniel had lived in for the day, and far superior to the jail cell before that, so all in all Daniel admitted, life was improving.

The forest fascinated Daniel as they rode. The trees and foliage exploded in light hungry leaves as often as possible. Competition for the weak light of the class ‘M’ star had prompted every plant to spread their photosynthesis as far and as high as possible. It was more jungle than a forest.

“Watch out,” Jacob tossed over his shoulder. “Even with a hunt last week, we still might run into a beast.”

“What’s a *beast*?” Daniel asked moving to the front of the trailer.

“The most dangerous animal around,” Jacob answered. “They stand about six feet tall when grown, terribly fast, have hands -- and worse yet, they know how to use them.”

“Are they intelligent?”

“Not like a man, but they’re great at figuring things out” Jacob said.

Daniel turned his attention back to the landscape passing on either side of the tractor and trailer.

The trees did not have single massive trunks as on Earth, but were composed of twisted masses of small flexible cores braiding together like an old hemp rope. with shoots and leaves exploding out at nearly every level.

The road twisted back and forth, following the path of least resistance for the small tractor, avoiding high hills and dense clusters

of rocks and plants. Often, the line of sight was less than fifty meters, occasionally less than twenty. Strange double-winged birds shot from the cover as the noisy tractor pulled through the wood.

A large, yellow and red, shape shot from the undergrowth leaping onto Jacob. Jacob tried to fend the animal off with one hand, while reaching for his rifle with the other. He failed at both tasks.

The animal's weight pressed Jacob down flat across the driver and passenger seats. As Daniel climbed forward towards the tractor, Jacob struggled with his left arm to keep the snapping jaw of the animal away from his neck, while grasping for the rifle with his right. His fingertips struck the rifle bouncing it off the tractor and onto the ground.

Daniel stepped from the trailer onto the hitch connecting it to the tractor, armed only with his crude club. Daniel fought to maintain his balance as the tractor veered off the road jamming itself into the thick brush beside the road.

Using short fast strikes, Daniel hit the creature on the back of the head, where the skull joined with the neck. If he couldn't drive it away, maybe he could at least distract it.

Of the *beast's*, and Daniel didn't doubt that this was a *beast*, six legs, two were holding Jacob down, the rearmost pair supported the creature's weight, leaving the middle pair free, which rotated one-hundred eighty degrees about on elbow-like joints and clawed at Daniel.

Daniel fell back from the claws, the tough coveralls he wore absorbing the attack. Damn, the thing was flexible. Daniel looked back on the road, but the rifle was no where to be seen.

Daniel moved to directly behind the thing, hoping it wouldn't be as agile as it was flexible. The club was doing no good, and the monster had to weight at least two hundred kilos.

"Get you legs, under it," Daniel shouted.

Daniel moved forward quickly and grabbed the beast by the rearmost pair of legs.

"Push, Jacob, push damn it!" Daniel shouted.

Together, they managed to disengage the beast from Jacob, although it dragged Jacob from the tractor as Daniel tried to drag it off. Once it was off the tractor, the beast, spun on its two sets of hind legs, sprinting back along the trail.

"Thank God that's over," Daniel said breathing heavily.

"Look out!" Jacob shouted as he shoved Daniel down, diving for cover himself behind the trailer.

The *beast* hadn't continued fleeing, but now stood very still, intently watching the men, Jacob's rifle cradled in his forelimbs.

As Daniel moved forward and the beast began firing. Daniel dove under the trailer rolling for cover.

The *beast* didn't aim, but fired in a blind spray of bullets. Daniel crawled towards the rear of the trailer, until he could view the *beast*.

It continued to firing the rifle, sending rounds downrange, some struck the tractor, most disappeared into the jungle, in a swath of destruction. Finally, the rifle emptied. Daniel watched as the *beast*, for a few more seconds tried to continue firing. Then the *beast* brought to rifle up to its eyes, turned it over, carefully examined it. It pulled the trigger a few more time, then threw the rifle aside and moved forward towards the trailer.

Daniel crawled backwards as quickly as he could, while remaining under the cover of the trailer. There had to be over a five hundred kilos stacked on the trailer, Daniel prayed that the *beast* wouldn't be able to lift it.

It didn't try to lift it, the *beast* placed both sets of its forelimbs on the rear of the trailer and pushed the trailer and tractor further into the brush, exposing Daniel.

The sharp reports of gunfire shattered the air, Daniel rolled as fast as he could away from the *beast*, as its head erupted in miniature geysers of blood.

Leaning against the tractor, Jacob finished emptying his pistol into the animal, his gun depleted; Jacob quickly switched magazines.

"God damn," Daniel said as he stood and stared at the body of the *beast*. "Just, God damn."

Daniel turned and saw that the legs of Jacob's trousers were red with blood.

#

"Impact is in seventy-nine hours," Peter said. The Aldermen were quiet, except for the Aldermen and Peter, the Hall was empty. Kyle listened to silence, the deafening pronouncement of a death sentence for every person in Havilah.

"There's no possibility of error?" Knight asked. Peter shook his head, his brown hair whipping about his ashen face.

"We've got to evacuate," Alderman Brown suggested. "That's the only option."

"Where will we go?" Kyle asked. "Do you seriously think we can walk ten thousand people past the beasts and the Death-angles?"

"We've got to try," Brown continued. "It's suicide to stay."

"We got to take the fishing boats," Alderman Mercer offered.

“Eleven thousand people?” Kyle answered. Use your head, we couldn’t get more than few hundred away, and they be perfect targets from orbit.”

“Murdering bastards,” Brown swore.

A pain grew behind Kyle’s eyes. Everything he had worked and sacrificed for was coming to nothing. The bastards were going to kill everyone and take what they wanted. Not today. Kyle knew the niggers had to be killed. It wouldn’t save Havilah, nothing could do that now, but he would make them pay for their crimes.

#

“What the hell did you think you were doing?” Edward shouted. Margaret felt her heart shattering. Edward didn’t shout, Edward never shouted. Now he was and she knew what happened here, what happened today, would never be erased.

“Answer me, damn it!” Edward stormed across their tiny living quarters and grabbed Margaret by the shoulder, yanking her from her seat.

“Control yourself,” She snapped as she broke from his grip. “Don’t ever think you can man-handle me!”

“You murder ten thousand people and you’re upset I touched you!” Edward spun on the balls of his feet, turning his back on her. “I can’t believe you! You’re acting like you’re proud of what you’ve done!”

“I am,” Margaret answered. “These a racists murdering scum. I’m not leaving them around to kill us all.”

“I’m the one they tortured,” Edward shouted. “If anyone had the right to drop a rock on them it was me and Daniel.”

“So why aren’t you supporting me?” Margaret asked. “You know that they deserve it. This isn’t murder it’s self-defense.”

“No,” Edward countered. “It’s murder. You didn’t trust us to agree with you, you didn’t trust me to agree with you, so you just went out and did it on your own.”

“Everyone would have dithered and talked and done nothing. Don’t you understand that?” Margaret stepped closer to Edward, only to see him step back away from her. The meter between them was fast becoming an uncrossable gulf.

“Would you have helped me?” Margaret asked, hating the plead in her voice.

“I don’t know,” Edward said softly. “Maybe not, but that’s not the point. You don’t get to make this decision for all of us. Now you’ve put Seclusion in danger.”

“I’ve saved Seclusion,” Margaret insisted.

“Yeah, like the League will trust us with any privacy after this stunt. Good job saving us.” The sarcasm sliced like a cutting torch.

“If we stand together,” Margaret said. “They can’t touch us. We declare that we were attacked, and we were, by terrorists, and it’s all legal.”

“It’s all a pack of lies,” Edward turned and stormed out of the compartment. Balling her hands in tight little fists Margaret fought back her tears.

#

“Hold the pressure tight,” Daniel instructed Jacob. “Do you have a first-aid kit on that tractor?”

“Under the drivers seat,” Jacob said through the pain as he held Daniel’s shirt firmly against the gunshot wound.

Daniel hurriedly searched under the drivers seat, finding the first-aid kit attached to the underside. A quick jerk pulled the kit free.

Good, at least these people didn’t trust to God to take care of blood loss and infections. Inside the kit were the an array of bandages, antibiotics, and emergency medications. Daniel hurried back to Jacob and started applying the tourniquet above the gun shot wound.

“Doesn’t look like you got hit in the femoral artery,” Daniel said as cheerfully as he could.

Jacob grimaced in pain.

“We’ll rest here for while,” Daniel finished securing the tourniquet and started surveying the medications in the kit. Jacob needed something for the pain, but Daniel hesitated at giving him something too strong; his best chances for survival were awake and alert.

“We have to move,” Jacob said, “Before the smell of blood brings predators.”

“What sort?” Daniel asked, his mind jerked away from pain killers and dosages.

“Everything, once the smell of blood gets in the air, it gets very dangerous out here,” Jacob explained. “We have to move.”

Listening to the natives was a prime survival rule of the Explorer Corp; Daniel wasn’t about to start ignoring it now.

Daniel picked Jacob up, ignoring the groans of pain the young man uttered, and placed him in the trailer. Hustling quickly down the trail, Daniel retrieved the rifle where the *beast* had abandoned it, and brought it back to Jacob.

“Do you have more rounds for that and the pistol?” Daniel asked.

Jacob, his face white with pain, nodded and pointed to the passenger seat of the tractor.

Daniel started to search under the seat as he had with the medical kit, but Jacob spoke up.

“Open the seat,” Jacob said through gritted teeth.

With just a few seconds searching Daniel found the catch and lifted the seat to reveal a storage compartment. Food, water, and rounds for the guns gleamed back at him. Daniel grabbed the ammunition and slammed the seat back close.

“Give me the pistol,” Daniel said as he handed Jacob the rifle ammo.

Jacob looked at the pistol and hesitated.

“I can’t use the rifle and steer at the same time,” Daniel said. “Not if I want to hit anything.”

Still, Jacob hesitated to surrender any of the firearms.

“You have to trust me,” Daniel urged. “If we’re going to get out of here alive, I need to be armed.”

Jacob studied Daniel intently, except for furtive glances to the jungle-forest around them. Daniel started to turn away and walk to the tractor when Jacob called out.

“I don’t know I can trust you,” Jacob said. “But I know I can’t trust the *beasts*.”

“Thanks,” Daniel said as he accepted the pistol from Jacob. The pistol was a very basic design, the rounds weren’t even electro-thermally enhanced, but they had mass and velocity and that was what mattered.

Daniel worked the mechanism, loaded a fresh magazine into the grip. As he checked the weapon, Daniel noticed Jacob eyeing him closely. Daniel wondered what lies he had been told his whole life.

“Does this trail spilt, or diverge?” He asked Jacob as he mounted the tractor.

“It goes straight to the mines,” Jacob replied. “Stay on the trail we won’t miss it.”

“Make yourself comfortable,” Daniel advised. “And keep a sharp eye open.”

Daniel started the tractor, its photo-fuel engine caught cleanly and ran smoothly -- at least these people understood the importance of decent maintenance -- with a touch of the accelerator the tractor started down the path.

#

Margaret walked slowly down the ship’s passageway. Edward’s anger she wasn’t terribly surprised at, even as it hurt more than she had expected. Edward was a sweet man and even when treated cruelly, he was too quick to forgive. Margaret hoped that the others would be more reasonable.

"It's Margaret," she announced after touching the call pad outside of Todd's and Catherine's quarters.

The hatch opened, but Catherine didn't step aside from the opening to allow Margaret in.

"Yes?" Catherine asked.

"We need to talk," Margaret said. "I don't care how pissed you are at me. We still have to work together."

"Unless the Council votes you off," Catherine replied.

"Let her in," Todd said from inside the compartment.

With a quick snort of disgust, Catherine moved her tiny Filipino form from the hatch. Margaret stepped inside, but didn't move from the hatch.

"Thanks," Margaret said.

"Say your piece," Todd said. He was sitting on the far side of the compartment, a hologram of Seclusion rotating in front of him.

"There really isn't any choice," Margaret said. "By now Herb has confirmed that the asteroid can't be controlled from here anymore, so the fate of the fascists is set."

"That's murder you're talking about Margaret," Catherine said.

"No," Margaret insisted. "In war it's called casualties, but I'm not here to argue semantics." Margaret turned her attention to Todd.

"The only question is do you want to save Seclusion?" She asked. "If the Council doesn't vote for war, the League will suspend our charter. You know it."

"You should have thought of that before you did it," Catherine snapped.

"I did," Margaret said. "Do you think I wanted to do this? Good God if there had been any other way I would have taken it. We don't have a choice, we've got eleven thousand fanatics who'd kill us in our sleep on one side and voyeurs out to rob us of our privacy on the other!"

"You're not in charge, Margaret," Todd said simply. "It wasn't your decision."

"Screw you!" Margaret shouted. She threw her hands up in frustration. "If it wasn't for me there wouldn't be a Seclusion! I started this colony, you and almost everyone on the council are johnny-come-latelys. But I didn't bitch when Daniel came aboard, and I didn't bitch when he brought you and Catherine either. But I am not going to sit aside while you talk and deal with scum. In the end we'd lose Seclusion and we'd be letting the worse kind of evil survive."

"Doesn't change that you had no right to do this," Todd snapped. "I don't like being played by you or by anyone!"

“This isn’t about what you like,” Margaret said. “It’s about what we have to do.”

“What we have to do is treat you as a murder,” Catherine said. “That includes Daniel.”

“Grow up!” Margaret stepped over towards Catherine, towering over Todd’s tiny wife. “You want to arrest me? Send me back for treatment? Fine with me! But you still have to decide if you’re going to throw Seclusion away, don’t tell me you’re that stupid!”

Spinning in the one-third gravity of the ships rotation, Margaret turned on her heels and stormed out.

#

The trail wound around grades too steep to climb, and through little valleys that promised good camping if the wildlife hadn’t been too wild. Daniel drove with the pistol lightly held in one hand, and his eyes peeled for danger both on the road and off.

“How are you doing?” Daniel shouted back to Jacob.

“No shock,” Jacob answered. “but it hurts like the dickens.”

“How did that thing know how to use a gun?” That predator was quite an animal, if it were an animal.

“*Beasts* can imitate almost anything they see,” Jacob answered, grunts of pain interrupting his speech as the trailer bounced over the uneven trail. “The older they get the more dangerous they are.”

“Are they intelligent?” Maybe Oliver and Margaret were going to get to fight some more. Of course, if these things were intelligent everyone would lose this planet, not just Brian and his people.

“They’re not made in God’s image,” Jacob said. “The beasts mimic people. If a *beast* see someone using a gun, even just once, it can use that gun. It won’t know how to how to do anything complex, but it can point and fire.”

“Frightening,” Daniel said.

“Locks, gates, just about anything you can learn by watching,” Jacob went on. “They’re a real devil if they hang around Havilah.”

“Do they pass that knowledge to other beasts?”

“Thank the Lord, no.” Jacob scanned the forest with his rifle as he spoke.

“Wish this thing moved faster,” Jacob admitted.

“We’re already clear of the area where we were attacked,” Daniel said.

“You don’t know Havilah,” Jacob said. “Until we’re back behind secure walls, we’re in danger.” Jacob twisted around in the trailer and faced Daniel. “A pack of devil-rats can take down a steer in seconds.”

“Your wall is making lots of sense,” Daniel said.

“There’s another at the mine,” Jacob said. “Until we get there we’re vulnerable. Everything around here is hungry all the time.”

“Makes sense,” Daniel said. “Competition for calories would be intense here.”

“Why do you say that?”

“This star is a class ‘M’ star,” Daniel explained. “You’re not getting as much power per square meter as you would say around a ‘G’ class star like Earth.”

Daniel pointed to the large broad leaves that covered nearly every plant of the forest.

“Even if these plants are getting the same efficiency of photosynthesis as terran plants, there’s a lot less power per leaf. So they grow bigger leaves. The herbivores feed on the plants, but the inefficiency just grows as you move up the food chain. The plant eaters have to eat more plants to achieve the same energy density as on Terra, and the carnivores are competing for animals not as rich in calories. So you get hungry, aggressive carnivores.”

“Makes sense,” Jacob agreed.

“I’ve seen it before,” Daniel said. “This isn’t the first ecosystem I’ve seen around a class ‘M’, but it does seem to be the most extreme.”

Just beyond the low purr of the engine, Daniel became aware of a silence in the forest. The countless noises of a living breathing biome stopped as the forest held its breath.

“Hold on,” Daniel said. Damn, this tractor. He needed real speed right now, and this thing would lose a race with a one-legged man.

“Death-angels,” Jacob said.

Daniel followed Jacob’s pointing hand and saw that the trees on either side of the path slowly filling with double-winged birds.

They were a deep red in color, almost blood-red, but a shade lighter than that ominous hue. As Daniel watched, more Death-Angels flew in settling on the branches watching over the trail. Closer inspection showed that they were, of course, not truly birds. They lacked feathers, but long loose scales gave them their coloration. Also unlike birds, they had teeth, sharp and pointed ones well suited for meat-eating.

“Are the poisonous?” Daniel asked.

“No,” Jacob said, never taking his eyes from the gathers flock. “They’re pack hunters.”

“Tell me.”

“They’ll sit and gather,” Jacob said. “They go after weak and injured animal. When they do, they swoop down together. I wish I had brought a shotgun.”

“Why didn’t you? With these things in the air?”

“I wasn’t planning on getting jumped,” Jacob snapped, his voice starting to crack. “But with something wounded, they move fast.”

Jacob turned and looked at Daniel.

“You’re not bleeding, they might leave you alone,” he said.

“Not likely,” Daniel put the pistol down and held up his hand. “I’ve got your blood here, they’ll smell that no doubt.”

“Maybe, maybe not. They tend to concentrate on one victim at a time.” Jacob turned back to watching the flock gather. “Brian once saw a flock tear up a lamb, and never once touch the shepherd.”

“Well, we can’t out run them on this,” Daniel said.

“It won’t be long,” Jacob said.

Damn it. They couldn’t be more than thirty minutes from the mine, there had to be something that could be done. Unfortunately, they didn’t have a handy wounded steer to toss these bloodthirsty pigeons.

Daniel looked down at his bloody hand print on the passenger seat on the tractor where he had gotten the rifle and pistol ammo. There was food in there.

Daniel reached over and popped open the compartment. Good, these people knew how to make survival rations. Concentrated, high-calorie food for people lost in the wood. Daniel started snatching the packages of rations and tearing them open with his teeth.

“Have you gone nuts?” Jacob asked.

“Ringing the dinner bell,” Daniel tossed some of the rations to Jacob.

“Smear them with blood from your bandage,” Daniel said.

“They’ve got to smell right, then start tossing them behind us.”

Jacob stopped asking questions, the light of understanding shinning from his eyes, a spark of hope that he wasn’t about to be eaten alive.

Daniel continued to tear open packages, smearing them with the dried blood on his hands. It wasn’t much, but Daniel prayed it would be enough.

The packages began landing on the trail behind the tractor and in scant seconds the Death-Angels began diving on them.

“It’s working!” Jacob shouted.

“Keep throwing,” Daniel urged. Daniel reached down for another ration, but he had already thrown the last behind the vehicle. Win or lose, they had made their bet.

The Death-Angels began fighting among themselves for the rations. Not a bloody to the death kind of fighting, but the scarcity of food had turned competition fierce.

“Hopefully they’ll be busy with that,” Daniel said.

“You would have made a good scout,” Jacob said.

“Explorer Scout before I joined the Explorer Corp,” Daniel answered.

Jacob collapsed into trailer, breathing heavily.

Twenty minutes later Daniel was before the gate into the mine. A touch of the controls and the gate opened to admit them to safety.

“No passwords or key locks?” Daniel asked.

“We don’t steal,” Jacob answered.

#

The talk with Herb had gone much better than the one with Todd and Catherine. Margaret tried not to think about Edward, that was too painful to visit and promised to be for a long time to come.

Herb’s anger at Margaret’s unconventional approach had been plain on his big round face, but Margaret could also see that the engineer in him was already working the facts. Herb knew when you had to work with the way things were and not how you wished them to be. But, how would he vote? Margaret had talked to him for an hour and she had no clear idea which way he was going to go.

Dr. Wells and Catherine were set, they lacked the resolve to make the hard calls. Margaret knew she could count on them to vote against the attack and cut Seclusion’s throat. Todd might vote with Catherine, he was mighty angry, but he was also more a realist than his wife, and he knew what these squatters were like firsthand. That could make the difference. Oliver was standing strong, Margaret had no doubts he could be counted on. That left Edward.

She had assumed that Edward would be at her side, physically and politically. She had taken Edward for granted, just like she always had. Just like she had Will.

A tiny tear welled up in Margaret’s eyes as she thought about her first marriage. Everyone assumed that she was a cold fish, nothing much engineering and physics, she didn’t let them know how much that hurt her.

Just because someone didn’t blubber all the time didn’t mean they didn’t feel things. Will had been handsome and smart and a more talented systems analyst Margaret hadn’t seen. Still, her career hadn’t been easy. There was so much she had to prove, over and over again. Whispered rumors about her privacy perversions made getting work

tough. She had to be twice as good as any other engineer just to be considered. That hadn't left a lot of time for a new husband.

One day she had come back from a lunar project and Will simply wasn't home. He never was home again.

Margaret looked around her quarters and wondered if Edward was ever coming home.

#

"Here," Daniel offered Jacob a pain killer from the medical kit. "You can relax and sleep now."

"Thanks," Jacob took the pill, still careful not to touch Daniel's deep brown skin.

"Where's my radio?" Daniel asked.

"Storage compartment under the hood of the tractor," Jacob said as he swallowed the medicine.

"Does this place have a radio?" Daniel asked as he looked around the mine's main control room.

"Yeah," Jacob said. "But it's digital."

"I wasn't going to call the ship," Daniel said. "We need to get someone out here to take you back. You need medical attention."

"They'll catch you," Jacob protested.

"We can't let that wound fester," Daniel pointed at Jacob's leg. "That could very easily get infected."

"I didn't risk everything just to end up back where we started" Jacob leaned up on one arm, scowling at Daniel.

"I'll take my chances in the forest," Daniel didn't like that prospect, but it seemed the only option. "It wouldn't be my first over-night on an alien world."

"It'd be your last."

"I'm not going to save my hide by letting you die," Daniel came over and squatted next to Jacob. "You risked a lot for me; I pay my debts."

"I'm not keen on dying either, nigg..." Brian stopped himself mid-syllable. "Daniel. Listen after you've gotten back to orbit I can call for someone to come get me. You can make it to the dock by yourself."

"How far's the dock?"

"A couple of miles," Jacob said. "There's a set of rails running down there. You can't miss it."

"No good," Daniel stood and stretched. "If you go into shock there'll be no one here to help you."

Daniel walked outside the little control shack for the mine. The sky had turned black already, to the east the gas giant was rising above the horizon, but it didn't yet reflect much light onto its moon.

Daniel knew the stars from Seclusion almost as well as he knew them from Earth. He had planned to spend quite a few hours in the wilderness of the little world, the stars were a constant that could be depended upon.

As he gazed across the many multicolored points of light he started searching the sky, hoping to spot the *Independence* as it zipped north to south. Sadly, the hurtling speck of light wasn't to be seen, but then Daniel's eye was drawn to a bright blue, slightly smeared, star.

That was out of place; no star or planet should have appeared there. Daniel watched closely, it had a tail, like comet, they hadn't picked up any comets when they surveyed the system, just that one asteroid that Herb was moving. Well, at least that was one danger they wouldn't have to worry about any more.

Daniel after finding his radio secured in the tractor, turned around and walked back into the shack.

Chapter 22

The Governing Council of Seclusion sat about their conference table in near silence.

Margaret wished the others weren't there so she could reach out and take Edward's hand. If he would take her hand, that alone would tell her so much. She pushed the thought from her mind, there were more important things right now. Later there would be time for reconciliation or crying or both.

"I'm calling the vote," Todd said, his voice hoarse. "Are we declaring the squatters terrorists who have attacked us an act of war?"

"Doctor Wells," Todd asked. "How do you vote?"

"Nay," Dr. Wells replied. "We have other options, I won't be a party to this."

"Oliver?" Todd continued.

"Yes," Oliver looked awake and refreshed compared to Todd.

"Hell, yes."

"Catherine?"

"I'm with Elizabeth," Catherine answered. "No."

"Margaret?"

"Of course." Margaret swept the hair out of her face. "We don't have the options some think we have."

"Edward?"

Edward didn't look up from the table, not to Todd and not to Margaret. Long seconds ticked by as Edward just stared at the surface of the table, the PEM coating imitating wood and nothing else.

"Edward," Todd said. "We need your vote."

"We got Daniel on the radio!" Captain Domingo's voice blurted loud and piercing into the conference room.

Chaos reigned for several moments as the entire Council reacted with shouts of joy.

“Daniel,” Todd said once the room was quiet enough. “Where the hell are you?”

“I’m at Havilah’s mining operation,” Daniel’s voice sounded steady and strong. Margaret doubted he was currently being coerced.

“Stay there,” Edward snapped. “Do not go back near the city itself.”

“That wasn’t the plan,” Daniel replied. “Apparently there’s a small bay where the mine ships the ores for processing. Any chance I could pick-up a lift there?”

“I’ll be right down,” Edward offered. Edward created a console in the conference table and started computing his flight.

“Daniel,” Margaret said. “How quickly can you get to the shore?”

“Might be a few hours,” Daniel answered. “I’ve got an injured man here. Jacob, who helped us escape, has been shot.”

“I’ll be there too,” Dr. Wells said.

“Glad to hear it,” Daniel said. “We have to hurry, it won’t take them long to figure out where I’ve gone.”

“About three and half to four hours,” Edward said looking up from his console.

“We’ll be there,” Daniel answered.

“Whatever you do,” Catherine suddenly interjected. “Do not go near the city.”

“That’s the second time I was given that advice,” Daniel replied, the suspicion in his voice plain through the radio broadcast.

“It’s for the best,” Margaret said.

“What is?” Daniel asked.

“Is there anyone who can over hear this?” Margaret asked.

“No,” Daniel replied slowly. “What’s going on?”

“We’re taking care of the fascists,” Margaret answered, and almost at once the Council was shouting and arguing again.

“Todd,” Daniel shouted once order had been restored. “What’s the straight story?”

“We’ll fill you in when you get here,” Todd reported. “But what you need to know right now is that our near-miss asteroid isn’t going to miss anymore. It’s heading right at Havilah.”

“Christ,” Daniel swore. “What made you go that far?”

“We’ll explain later,” Todd said. “Right now, get to the shore as fast as you can. Edward and Dr. Wells will meet you.”

#

Raymond Folkes, Paul Sykes, and Brian took their seats in Kyle’s office. Folkes and Sykes were the official colony pilots, trained to fly the Redemption at the coming of the rapture, Brian was their backup

because in a land as dangerous as Havilah it was always wise to have a backup.

“What’s the deal?” Raymond asked.

“The niggers in orbit have gotten lethal,” Kyle said. Kyle stood and began pacing about the small office.

“They affixed a fusion motor to an asteroid and it’s currently heading right at us.”

“Damn,” Paul swore softly.

“Alderman Knight is trying to talk to them on the radio, but I don’t think he’ll get anywhere with them. It’s clear they always had this at the very least as a back up plan.”

“How do you know that?” Brian asked.

“You don’t put together a fusion rocket over night,” Kyle explained. “They must have been working on the asteroid the whole time they were ‘negotiating’ with us. If we didn’t roll over, they’d roll us over.”

“What are we going to do?” Raymond asked.

“We have to launch the Redemption,” Kyle replied. “We know the track of their ship. We can release junk in their path, or at least threaten to do that, force them to redirect that rock.”

“Kill them?” Brian asked. Kyle noted that Raymond’s and Paul’s face were equally pale.

“Threaten to kill them,” Kyle elaborated. “I’m not saying violate any of God’s commandments, but they don’t know that do they?”

As the pilots nodded, Kyle wondered which would attack the niggers if it came down to it. ‘Thou Shall Not Kill’ was fine when you lived and dealt with Christians, but these niggers didn’t respect life the way decent folk did, and Kyle would be damned if he would let them profit from that.

#

“You shouldn’t be so touchy about being called nigger, it’s what you are,” Jacob said.

“The word is offensive and dehumanizing,” Daniel said. The sat in the control shack of the mine, Daniel with his back against the wall, an eye on the door, Jacob rested as comfortably as he could across the floor.

“You’re not a white man,” Jacob protested. “What else can we call you but what you are?”

“I’m a sub-Saharan Descendant,” Daniel replied. “But I’d much rather just be called Daniel, or Mr. Diego.”

Daniel stood and stretched his aching arms and legs.

“But even that is a little ridiculous,” Daniel added. “I was born and raised in Mississippi, and my mother was Cuban. I hope we learn someday that race isn’t the important thing.”

“It is important,” Jacob sat up on one elbow. “If you’re a son of Able you can be saved, and only white men are the sons of Able.”

“There are no sons of Cain,” Daniel squatted down next to Jacob. “Look Jacob, the bible’s truths aren’t literal, but spiritual, but even a literal Bible tells us there are no sons of Cain left.”

“What do you mean?”

“God saw that the world was so filled with evil and wickedness that he destroyed it with water. In a flood that lasted forty days and forty nights, right?” Daniel asked.

“Except Noah and his family, they were righteous so they were spared.”

“That’s right, and he wasn’t from Cain was he?”

Jacob shook his head.

“So all the sons of Cain died in the flood, unless God saved them in the back of the boat.”

Daniel stood and walked to the far side of the room.

“We all have the Mark Of Cain, it’s just not in our skin,” Daniel said. “We all can kill given the right conditions; even you in Havilah.”

“We don’t kill,” Jacob insisted. “Thou Shall Not Kill. Alderman Knight says that means ever.”

“Except we were going to be killed, until you helped us.” Daniel said.

“I don’t know it Alderman Brock would have killed you,” Jacob said. “He’s not a bad man.”

“I kind of feel different,” Daniel started looked around for something to convert into a stretcher. There was no way Jacob would be able to walk four or five klicks to the coast.

“He’s not,” Jacob insisted as Daniel searched. “He’s trying to protect us.”

“We’re not here to hurt you,” Daniel replied. “There’s nothing to protect you from.” Daniel thought about the asteroid, hurtling towards Havilah even as they spoke. He considered telling Jacob, but right now wasn’t the right time. After the shuttle was down and there wasn’t a chance of being captured again. Then he’d tell Jacob, and he’d find out what made the Council vote for such a thing. Daniel couldn’t imagine it was just him. Wars should never be started lightly and mass murder should never be done. Didn’t people learn anything from the twenty-first century?

“Well even nigg... Sub-Suharans shouldn’t be killed.” Jacob lay back on the floor. “It’s for God to judge, not men.”

“What are you searching for anyway?” Jacob asked.

“Something to make into a stretcher,” Daniel answered. “We can’t leave you here. It could take hours for help to arrive and if you went into shock you’d die.”

“You can’t carry me all the way to the sea,” Jacob insisted. “I don’t care how much of a big bull nigg.. How strong you are.”

“I was going to drag you behind,” Daniel explained.

“Too slow,” Jacob said, “We’d both be eaten before you got half way there.”

Jacob sat up.

“We could take a mining car,” Jacob said. “We’d ride in it like a load of ore.”

“Show me,” Daniel asked.

With great care, Daniel helped Jacob out of the mining shack to the tiny railhead just beyond it. The mines were a totally automated affair, small unmanned machines bore into the ground, passing ore-rich loads back up through processing equipment that lined the mine shafts. At the surface, the semi-processed ores were loaded into carts and presumably shipped to the sea.

“See,” Jacob said grimacing through the pain his leg was clearly giving him. “We can ride all the way to the bay.”

Jacob hopped over to the cart and indicated the heavy metal lid that enclosed it when loaded.

“We can even have cover if there are any beasts about,” he added.

Jacob programmed the master controls, taking the mining operation of line for a few minuets as he did so, and then they were ready.

Still showing distaste at being touched by someone other than a white man, Jacob bit his lips as Daniel loaded him into the cart.

Daniel then climbed aboard and settled on the floor of the dirty vehicle. The cart smelled of dirt and machinery.

Daniel looked up into the nighttime sky. The blue star that had been the fusion rocket on the asteroid had long gone dark, but Daniel knew where the asteroid was and where it was still heading.

Daniel knew he owed Jacob a deep debt, but what could he realistically do? Even if he stayed here at the mining facility, without the support of the colony it would only be a matter of time. At home, it would be a quick clean death. Daniel was only one voice on the Council, and even if he wanted to, he doubted to could persuade them from striking. It was preemption, removing a danger before it became

something too dangerous or powerful to resist. Still, it didn't feel like self-defense to Daniel, it felt like murder.

#

"Daniel's alive," Catherine announced from the door to Margaret and Edward's cabin. "No thanks to you."

Catherine stepped into the cabin, Margaret remained where seated at her desk, not rising to the little woman's provocation. What did she know of the risks and sacrifices Margaret had made? Not one among them really understood, she had hoped that Edward would have, but it looked as if he couldn't see it either.

"You didn't care if Daniel was alive or not," Catherine said as she attempted to tower over the seated Margaret, but Catherine's slight stature made the attempt more ridiculous than imposing.

"I do care," Margaret replied. "But I really thought he was dead. A sub-Saharan decedent on a planet of white racists, what are the odds of his escape and survival?"

"Apparently better than you thought," Catherine snapped back.

"Is there a point to this?" Margaret stood, looming over the small Filipino woman, but Catherine refused to step back, leaving the two women just centimeters apart.

"Your idiot plan nearly got Daniel killed. That's the point."

Margaret stepped around Catherine and walked over to her bed.

"If I had known that Daniel was still alive, held captive by those creeps, I still would have done it," Margaret said as she sat on the edge of the bed. "Not a chance that would have changed my mind."

"You cold blooded bitch," Catherine said softly. "I thought I knew you, but I don't."

"I did what was right and what had to be done. Those people down there are the ideological brothers of Nazis and every other genocidal group that ever existed. At least when I'm acting like an 'idiot' I'm doing it for Seclusion and not for myself."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Catherine leaned against Margaret's desk, keeping her distance.

"I'm not blind. Todd was pretty mad at Daniel when they left; it was something personal. You've been doing the nasty with Daniel, haven't you?"

Catherine face went slack with shock at the accusation, then Margaret watched as Catherine considered lying, but in the ended her expression was more honest than Margaret had expected.

"I was having an affair," Catherine admitted. "It's over, and it has nothing to do with what we are talking about."

“It has everything to do with Seclusion,” Margaret stood up again from the bed and stalked over to Catherine.

“From what I hear Todd was practically a basket case down there. Your slutty behavior almost got them all killed.”

Catherine slapped Margaret before Margaret was even aware that the blow was in motion.

“Don’t you take that tone with me,” Catherine said, her small round face flush with anger. “I love Todd, and you know nothing.”

“Yet, it was Daniel in danger that brought to stomping into my quarters, wasn’t it?” Margaret stepped over to the wall and commanded a communications panel to appear in the PEM-coated surface.

“Shall I call security to drag you away?” Margaret asked.

“If anyone should be arrested it’s you,” Catherine said, her face starting to regain a little of its natural olive complexion. “When this crisis is over, you’re going to pay the piper.”

“Do you honestly think I didn’t know that?” Margaret snapped. “Do what you will, I’ll sleep sound knowing I made this call.”

Catherine left, slamming the door like a petulant child.

#

Daniel bounced side to side as the little ore cart chugged along the narrow gauge railway. From the faint gray light reflected by the gas giant high overhead, Daniel could just make out Jacob, pale and in pain at the other end of the cart. Unable to leave Jacob alone in his pain, Daniel spoke.

“Brian’s a pilot?” Daniel as the little ore-cart glided along, propelled by a nearly silent electric motor.

“Yea,” Jacob replied his voice growing stronger with pride. “Really a reserve pilot, it’s not a full-time job for anyone.”

“We didn’t detect any sign of recent fusion activity,” Daniel said. “When do you fly your ship?”

“The Redemption isn’t going to fly until The Rapture,” Jacob’s voice shook a little as he wince at a pain from his leg. “If we miss the day of return because someone crashed, that’d doom everyone on Havilah.”

Daniel looked over at Jacob.

“When Jesus Christ, our Lord, returns to Earth,” Jacob explained. “All the saved will be raised up, bodily, to heaven to live forever with God and Christ.”

“The Rapture,” Daniel said.

“That’s what I said, before the final battle with Satan and his minions, we will be called home to join in the Rapture. God will send a ship to our world, and we will return to Earth.”

“What about the people who died here? Daniel asked. “If you need to be on Earth for the Rapture, won’t you end up leaving them behind?”

“Only the exiled would have been left,” Jacob said. “Everyone else will return home with us.”

“That’s a lot of bodies,” Daniel commented.

“Not whole bodies,” Jacob said. “But their ashes are safe in our crypts. We will take them with us, to be raised and to live again.”

“But the exiled ones, won’t” Daniel noticed.

“Someone who kills, or covets, or steals, or commits adultery had broken his pact with God,” Jacob explained. “It is up to each of us to live by his commandments, and we will each be judged.”

“Do many people get exiled?” Daniel asked.

“Not many,” Jacob replied “Years can go by without anyone being brought before the Aldermen.” Jacob looked away from Daniel. “Of course this year is going to be different.”

“Brock,” Daniel offered. “Has an Alderman ever been exiled?”

“No,” Jacob relied lazily. “But I wasn’t thinking about Alderman Brock, I was thinking about me.”

“You?” Daniel had thought that there would be trouble for Jacob saving their skins, but he hadn’t guessed at just how much.

“Yeah,” Jacob answered. “I’ve even stolen to get you and your friends out of here. Come judgement day I’m going to be with the dead here on Havilah.”

In the dim gray light Daniel could just make out the tears forming on Jacob’s cheeks. This kid was giving life eternal -- as he thought it worked -- to do the right thing, yet not a meter away Daniel sat with the secret knowledge of the rock coming to kill everyone in Havilah. For the first Daniel wondered who was the villain and who was the righteous.

“You see now,” Jacob said after a long silence. “ You have to move one. There’s no way we can live together here.”

“We can’t,” Daniel answered. “The *Independence* won’t survive another jump.”

“But you must see we can’t get along,” Jacob said. “The taint of sin on you brings out the sin in us.”

“Everyone is a sinner,” Daniel said. “We are born with sin, your people and mine, we didn’t bring it here.”

“Ours is not the Mark Of Cain,” Jacob snapped back.

Daniel refused to argue, not because Jacob was wrong, but because Daniel feared that Jacob was right. Somewhere up above a decision had been made to kill eleven thousand people, where here on the ground souls were being sacrificed to save a single man.

#

“No, Kyle,” Knight said. Knight wide mouth was turn down in a frown. Kyle looked around in exasperation. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. They weren’t going to do anything?

“You’ve got to let us fly this shuttle,” Kyle snapped. “Without a clear threat to their lives those niggers are not going to listen to reason!”

Knight looked up at the night sky. Most of the sky was hidden by the hulking bulk of the hanger, but a few stars were shinning just beyond Goliath.

“I wonder if it is a threat,” Knight said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a practical man, Kyle,” knight said bringing his gaze back to Kyle eye level. “Sometimes too practical. We’ll save ourselves without sin.”

Knight turned away from Kyle and went into the hanger to tell the pilots that there would be no flight.

#

The little cart move on in near silence, only the soft whir of the ore-car’s electric motor broke the still air of the night.

On either side of the narrow gage track the lush jungle-forests of Havilah were subdued into grays by the washed out light of the gas giant hanging in the sky.

From the forest Daniel heard the calls of strange animals, and a constant rustle of movement. A scent of blooming trees wafted over the cart, reminding Daniel of mashed potatoes and butter.

Daniel poked his head above the rim of the cart periodically scanning left and right. Too much about this world was unknown.

“Are the *beasts* nocturnal?” Daniel asked.

“They pretty much stick to daylight,” Jacob answered. “but there are plenty of smaller things that come out at night. Looking for weak and wounded animals.”

“Have you been to a lot of worlds?” Jacob asked.

“I served in the League’s Explorer Corps for twenty years,” Daniel replied. “Most of what we found were airless rocks and poisonous atmospheres. Shirtsleeve worlds like this are pretty rare.”

“Guess that’s why you don’t want to move along,” Jacob said.

“We can’t,” Daniel sighed as he spoke. “That’s a hard fact we both have to adjust to.”

“All my fathers ever wanted was to be left alone,” Jacob said.

“That’s what we want too,” Daniel got to his knees and looked ahead along the rails, a world of deep shadows extended as far as he could see, which is to say not more than twenty meters.

“It’s not the same,” Jacob insisted. “The Founders were hounded off Earth, they didn’t want to leave they were forced to. Do you really think the sons of Adam wanted to flee from the world God had created for them?”

“Lots of people wanted new colonies; you weren’t the only ones.” Daniel kept scanning the forest, desperately wishing there were more than just the two of them here.

“The Founders were hounded for their beliefs,” Jacob went on, Daniel noticed that even while excited talking about the history of their settlement, Jacob would pop up to scan the forest.

“The mud-people had so turned the world against God, that to believe in God was considered crazy.” Jacob said. “Christians were again martyrs, only instead of lions they were fed to the doctors, to be ‘cured’.”

“So the founders must have left Earth during the mid-twenty-third century.” Daniel said. “During the backlash after the religious wars.”

“It was the muslims and false religions that fought that war,” Jacob protested. “Christians defended themselves against murders and tyrants in the service of satan.”

“I think it was a little more complex than that,” Daniel said. “But I understand your people a little better. I think I would have left in the mid-twenty-third century too.”

“Why?” Jacob asked. “You’re not a real Christian.”

“Wrong,” Daniel answered. “Born and raised Southern Baptist. My mother was baptized in Dad’s church while they were still dating.”

“Alderman Knight says that niggers can’t be Christians.”

“Alderman Knight is mistaken, and don’t call me a nigger.”

Daniel shook his head at the rampant stupidity and continued on.

“Jesus didn’t say anything in the scriptures about race. It is through Christ that people are redeemed of their sins and can achieve salvation.” Daniel sat back down in the little cart, as he did he noticed that his end was slightly lower than Jacob’s. They were headed down slope, hopefully on the final leg to the sea.

“What matters is that the Founders wanted a place where they could live in peace, respecting the Lord’s commandments, without being forced to live a sinful and decadent life.” Jacob’s voice grew loud with forcefulness. “Now, you’re going to take all that away.”

Daniel remained silent. Soon, there would be nothing to take away because the Governing Council had declared that nothing would survive.

#

“Daniel, do you read me?” Edward’s voice startled Daniel as he rode the rail.

“I read you,” Daniel responded as the cart kept moving.

“I make my ETA at the landing zone to be about thirty-five minutes,” Edward said. “How are you coming on your end?”

“Making good time,” Daniel reported. “We should be at the dock in about twenty minutes, if we’re not there just wait we won’t be long.”

“We?” Edward asked, “Who’s with you?”

“Jacob,” Daniel replied. “The Samaritan who got us out of that hell hole.”

“I owe him a beer,” Edward said as he laughed. “Guess they all aren’t assholes.”

“No,” Daniel’s voice grew softer. “They may be wrong-headed, but there are some decent people down here.”

“De-Orbit burn coming up,” Edward announced. “See you in person soon, be ready to scoot.”

Daniel switched off the radio and dropped it back into his pocket.

“What are we going to do after you’re back on the shuttle?” Jacob asked from his side of the ore-car.

“You’re coming along,” Daniel explained. “Dr. Wells is on that shuttle too. We’ll get you some real treatment, and then drop you off at Havilah.”

“Am I your prisoner?” Jacob asked, Daniel noticed Jacob’s finger closing on his rifle.

“No,” Daniel answered. “And if you insist, we’ll leave you here. It’s your call if you want treatment. I don’t believe in forcing anything on anyone.”

“Glad for it,” Jacob agreed. “The sooner this ‘emergency’ is over the sooner we can Havilah can get back to normal.”

“If you’re going to be exiled,” Daniel said. “You could come with us. It’s not Havilah but it beats trying to outrun beasts.”

“I have to testify before the Alderman.” Jacob answered, his voice was harsh and low. “Alderman Knight thought me that a man pays his dues.”

“I met him,” Daniel said. “He was asking the questions before you stated torturing us.”

“We didn’t torture you!” Jacob sat up violently and glared at Daniel.

“Alderman Knight never ordered anyone to do that,” Jacob protested. “He’s a good man.”

“Seemed like one,” Daniel said as gently as he could. “Except for the racism, he could have taught at my Sunday school.”

“The truth isn’t racism,” Jacob spat back as he propped himself up with arms on the side of the ore-cart.

“Everything you’ve done is for your own good,” Jacob accused. “I’m ruining my life so that my neighbors aren’t tainted with your sin.”

“Next time I’m beaten and shocked I’ll remember your Christian hospitality.” Daniel knew he shouldn’t have said it even as the words escaped from his lips. He needed help to get out of here alive, and worse yet, Jacob’s idiocy wasn’t Jacob’s fault.

“I should know better than to expect gratitude from a nigger,” Jacob said. “The only you’d be grateful for is if I gave you a white woman.”

Daniel felt his fingers clench in fists, the tension rolled up his arms like a wave of hate and anger.

Marshaling the discipline of an officer, he resisted the impulse to strangle Jacob until the little jerk begged for air. Instead, Daniel sat deep and the ore-cart and fumed.

#

Daniel was beginning to calm down; wishing he could stay angry. Anger kept the guilt at bay, but as the anger slipped away, he found himself stealing glances towards the sky.

It wasn’t Jacob fault that he believed the worst racist claptrap, anymore than it was the fault of the vast majority of the League who thought that Daniel and his friends were perverts. People rarely questioned what they were taught as children, the most tenacious of lessons, even the idiotic ones.

“I do understand,” Daniel said to Jacob. “We came out here for reasons very much like the ones that motivated your Founders.”

“Somehow I doubt it,” Jacob snapped, clearly he was more talented at holding on to anger than Daniel, but Daniel was sure that was a trait common to teenagers across known space.

“In some ways Earth is better off than when the Founders left,” Daniel continued. “In others it is worse. People are no longer thought to be mentally ill for having faith. There’s been a new revival in North America; in fact.”

“Somehow I don’t think they worship as we do.” Jacob said.

“Not most,” Daniel agreed. “But there lots of churches, and no one bothers them.”

“So why are you here?” Jacob asked.

“Because there is no privacy anywhere,” Daniel answered. “Every second of every day people are under the eye of active surveillance.”

“It started about fifty years after the Founders left Earth, I guess,” Daniel continued. “And now it is everywhere. You can touch just about any surface have full image and audio projected to you for anyone on the planet. And if the lag time doesn’t bother you, throughout the League.”

“Everyone is watching everyone?” Jacob asked

“Aside from the Guardian Angels, no, most people only get peeped on here-and-there, but if you’re famous, for anything, you can count on every crap being recorded.”

“Sounds like you got spied on a lot,” Jacob asked.

“Yeah,” Daniel answered. “It’s why I wanted to come to Seclusion. I got tired of every piss being watched, recorded and debated.”

“What did you do to get that kind of attention?”

Daniel didn’t know which question he would rather face from Jacob, what happened on the *Anson* or where is that asteroid heading?

“I got called a hero for being a coward,” Daniel answered honestly. Daniel saw that Jacob was willing to let it lie just like that.

“I was on the Explorer ship, *Anson*. This was about five years ago,” Daniel felt the story spilling out of him. The first person in five years he felt he could really tell everything to, all the while Daniel was hiding a bigger secret, and larger share of guilt that he had known could exist.

“We found a splinter colony,” Daniel went on, his voice seeming to find it’s own strength without him. “They weren’t doing anywhere near as well as Havilah is, they were just hanging on by their fingernails. We landed and they were pretty happy to see us. It looked like any number rescues I had read about.”

Daniel stopped and listened to the night for a while. There was the low constant noise from the wood, the steady clicking of the ore-cart, and deep within his chest the increasing pace of his heart beat.

“Turns out they were nationals,” Daniel continued. “Their forefathers had fled the absorption of the old United States in the League. They started paranoid and their offspring were worse, but better at hiding it.”

“What happened?” Jacob asked softly.

“They smuggled guns aboard the *Anson*, and before we lifted ship they overthrew the crew.” Daniel looked up into the night sky, that tiny star wasn’t visible from this hemisphere, but he felt the ghosts staring at him just the same.

“What did you do?”

"I hid," Daniel admitted. "I heard the gunshots and I ran. Later I told myself it was because I was unarmed and escape and evasion made sense, but God's honest truth, I was scared."

"I ended up hiding in one of the major air-ducts feeding the mess decks," Daniel tapped the side of the ore-cart with his forefinger as he talked. Both his speech and the tapping increasing in tempo as he spoke.

"In videos you can always get around a ship by airducts," Daniel laughed. It was a empty hollow laugh. "Reality isn't like that. I was stuck there, watching and listening to everything."

"Everything?"

"The assholes decided to use the mess deck as their interrogation room. No one in the crew let on I was loose -- the nationalists hadn't bothered to get an accurate count of the crew, idiots -- I watched as my friends were beaten, and in the end as their throats were cut."

The two men sat in silence for awhile. Daniel's mind replayed for him each scream, each throat as it was cut.

"You got away though," Jacob observed.

"Yeah," Daniel said. How many times had he wished that he hadn't escaped. How many lives would have paid the price though if he had been found.

"They managed to get the access codes from the crew and they lifted ship." Daniel let his head fall forward to his knees. "They had no experience in free-fall. I slipped past them and opened the ship's atmosphere valves. They were dead in ninety-seconds."

"Damn," Jacob swore.

"You can say that," Daniel agreed. "I got the ship back to Earth, and then we learned that they had already began planning on using it as an orbital missile. They planned to kill off the traitors at Washington D.C."

Daniel stood and put both hands on the sides of the ore cart, turning his back to Jacob, facing forward.

"I was the hero of the day," Daniel said. "I saved millions. After that I was never left alone again."

Daniel thought he saw a glint of water far ahead. What was he going to do when he got back to the Independence? Was there anything he really could do?

"If there had been Guardian Angels on the *Anson*, they never would have taken it," Daniel said.

"You believe in angels?" Jacob asked.

"Software intelligences," Daniel said. "Literally thousands of them, watching all people continually. Someone tries to commit a

crime, and they're arrested before they've taken a step outside their home. Someone gets really sick or hurt, and emergency crews are there before they hit the ground. There's no crime, but no privacy either."

"Sadly," Daniel continued. "It was an Explorer Tradition to not have them. Explorers felt that there were an elite force, we changed that after the *Anson*."

"I'm not sure I'd like the idea of being watched all the time," Jacob said.

"I know I don't," Daniel said. "That's why we came out here to found Seclusion, to have privacy. They tried to stop us, but we won our charter legally."

"But there must be other worlds," Jacob said, returning to the subject of ownership.

"Not very many where a person can breathe the air," Daniel swept his hand taking in the forest and sky around them. "This is a treasure."

"Thou Shall Not Steal." Jacob narrowed his eyes as he spoke.

"I'm not going to steal anything," Daniel said. "There are those who think you're the thieves, taking this prime planet without permission."

"We were here first," Jacob said. "Maybe this League will say its our world and not yours."

Daniel was silent again. No one awards planets to dead people, when the League arrived in eight hundred days, there would be only one claim, and a declaration of war to back it up. If it this were so clean, the right thing to do, why did he feel as if he needed a bath.

What could he do? Force Jacob to come along if he didn't want to? He promised Jacob that he was his choice, but leaving him here was murder. That seemed a poor reward for saving his life, and the lives of the rest of the landing team. Daniel dismissed the idea, even if he came along, would he really be happy? Everyone he knew would be dead. No, coming with him was not the answer. But, if that wasn't the answer what was?

They were racists, a meme that had killed millions of people throughout the history of mankind, what sort of freedom did they deserve?

The same freedom as a bunch of perverts, maybe?

The answer came to Daniel more clearly than anything he had thought in more than a year. They deserved the chance to grow-up, wasn't that what his friends thought about Seclusion? The rock had to be diverted, even if he had to act on his own, and if the Council voted for this act of war he had no doubt he would be acting alone, he had to

stop that rock. Take command of the controls and blast it into a new orbit before it was too late.

He had been staring at his face in the mirror, disgusted with himself over his affair with Catherine, how could he expect to live with a guilt as large as genocide?

Daniel stood tall breathing deeply. Confidence flooded throughout his frame; he knew he was doing the right thing. It was time for the truth to set them free.

Chapter 23

This nigger, Daniel, wasn't at all what Jacob expected. Jacob kept a watchful eye on Daniel as they rode, but Jacob was forced to admit that Daniel didn't seem to be about to fly into a blood frenzy, like a *beast* on the hunt.

Jacob peeked over the edge of the cart; they were almost to the dock and so they were almost rid of the nigger.

"There's the dock," Jacob said as they crested the final rise between them and the tiny bay here.

"The shuttle's never going to be able to land in that bay," Daniel said. "Edward will have to land in the open sea."

"We have some small boats here," Jacob suggested.

"That'll do," Daniel was nearly invisible in the night, so little light reflected off his dark skin.

The cart moved into place at the ore receiving facility. To their left the final ore-processing and packing machine stood silent. To their right the land dropped away to the bay, the waters were black as Goliath reflected in the small bay.

"We have to walk from here," Jacob said as he struggled to get upright.

The pain in his leg was devastating, far worse than when he had broken his collar bone six years ago.

"Here," Daniel said. "Let me help you out."

Jacob realized he wasn't going to be able to climb out of the cart by himself, it just wasn't going to happen. Nodding, he offered his arm to Daniel.

Daniel's fingers grasped his arm with strength, but gently. Jacob, trying desperately to not show how much pain he was in, carefully climbed out of the cart.

“Have you ever been shot?” Jacob asked, one arm draped over Daniel’s shoulder.

“No,” Daniel answered.

“I can’t recommend it,” Jacob tried to joke.

Using Daniel like a crutch, the two men hobbled to the single dock at the waters edge.

“Daniel,” The radio at Daniel’s waist sparked to life. “Are you there?”

Daniel gently helped Jacob to sit on the dock and then answered.

“I’m here Edward.”

Jacob looked around the automated camp. There was a building about a hundred yards inland, but he knew that there wasn’t anything in the way of food or water in there. No one came up to the mine unless it was to repair something. If he stayed here and no could come up from Havilah he’d be on his own, wounded, and without supplies.

“Daniel,” Jacob said. “I’ll take that doctor you were offering.”

“Glad to hear it,” Daniel replied, his teeth flashing white in his dark face. “You’ve saved my life and I like to pay my debts.”

Jacob let his mind wander as Daniel discussed the pick-up with Edward. The pain killers Daniel had given him back at the mine site had worn off and the pain was becoming blinding.

“We have to get out to him,” Daniel said. “I can drive the boat.”

“Good,” Jacob replied, trying not to move. “I don’t think I’m up to it.”

Again working with great care, Daniel help Jacob into the small boat. Jacob closed his eyes and tried to forget about the pain, to forget about everything, as Daniel steered the craft out of the bay.

Each time the boat rocked or dropped from a wave pain shot like a dagger from the wound. Still, the cool sea spray coming over the bow felt good, and Jacob knew that this long difficult night was almost over.

“Okay,” Jacob heard Daniel call out sometime later. “Drain the lock.”

Jacob looked around him, trying to bring his mind back awake. The little boat was inside a hold, must be the shuttle’s. Jacob listened the water drained out of the hold. The boat settled, but didn’t list as the water in the lock was drained away. Jacob pulled himself upright as a hatch at the rear of the lock open, and an woman with long blonde hair, tied firmly back, hurried in.

“So what happened?” she asked as she and Daniel helped Jacob out of the boat.

“Rifle,” Daniel answered.

“Right,” she said. Then she turned her face to Jacob. “I’m Dr. Wells. Is there anything I need to know? Allergic to anything?”

“No,” Jacob answered. “I’m Jacob.”

“Don’t speak unless you have to,” Dr. Wells said. “Daniel, help me get him onto the stretcher.”

Gently, but efficiently, Dr. Wells and Daniel moved Jacob to the stretcher, and from there deeper into the shuttle.

#

Eleven thousand people streamed through the streets of Havilah. Tonight there were not wearing their Sunday clothes, tonight no one stood watch on the walls, and no one smiled. Eleven thousand people walked slowly to the church, eleven thousand people prepared to die.

Kyle watched them from the hanger, hating them for their compliance in their own murder. God wasn’t going to save anyone here tonight, God never saved anyone. Knight referred to Havilah as his flock, he was right they were sheep.

“Alderman Brock!” Brian called as he hurried towards the hanger. “You sent for me?”

“Yes,” Kyle said. He placed a hand on Brian’s shoulder and lead him into the hanger.

Inside the Redemption dominated the scene, larger than life, but inert.

“We have to launch the Redemption,” Kyle said as he more pushed than lead Brian towards the gangway leading onto the shuttle flight-deck.

“I thought that hadn’t been approved,” Brian protested.

“We’re past that now,” Kyle insisted. He put Brian on the step up to the gangway and forced him forward by walking behind him, always keeping them moving forward.

“I don’t understand,” Brian said.

“Do you want everyone here to die?” Kyle asked.

“No, but it doesn’t matter,” Brian said. “They’re going to divert the asteroid.”

“And why are they going to do that?” Kyle stopped short, Brian’s voice was filled with conviction that didn’t sound like faith.

“um... they just are.” Brian stuttered, pausing at the hatch to the shuttle.

“You know something, Brian,” Kyle accused. Stepping forward until he was just inches from the boy. “What do you know?”

“They’ve got their nigger back, sir,” Brian answered. “He went up to the mines early today. He’s back by now.”

“And you think that will make them call off their attack?” Damn the idiot!

“Sure,” Brian said sincerely. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“Who helped them escape?” Kyle asked, certain that the answer was already in his thoughts.

“Jacob,” Brian answered. “And I helped. It wasn’t right treating them like that. It wasn’t Christian.”

“Damn you!” Kyle almost punched the boy. This was what happened when you dreamed a world instead of living in the real one.

“Get in that shuttle!” Kyle ordered. “We’re going to launch this shuttle and make those niggers turn that rock!”

#

“That was a good dressing,” Dr. Wells said to Daniel after finishing treating Jacob. Jacob was on a table, maybe even the same one that Brian had kicked his feet up on so long ago. The doctor has made the table in a makeshift sick-bed.

“Thanks,” Daniel said. “How are you feeling?”

“No pain,” Jacob answered. “So I can’t complain.”

Dr. Wells tapped the communications console next to her makeshift sickbed and called to the flight-deck.

“I’m finished here,” she said. “You can lift off whenever you like, Edward.”

“No yet,” Daniel said. “Edward, can you join us back here?”

“Sure,” Edward answered. “I’ll be right back.”

“What’s up?” Jacob asked.

“There some news you need to hear,” Daniel said. “And there some answers I need to find out.”

“Daniel,” Dr. Wells said, concern growing in her hazel eyes. “Shouldn’t this be discussed privately?”

“What’s the matter, Elizabeth?” Daniel leaned back against the bulkhead, just nodding to Edward as the pilot entered the compartment. “Can’t you be honest with who’ve you declared war on?”

“No, not me,” Dr. Wells snapped. “I never would have agreed to it.”

“War?” Jacob asked, sitting up from the conference table that acted as his bed. “What’s going on?”

“That’s what I’m finding out, Jacob.” Daniel turned to face Edward and Dr. Wells. “How the hell could the council vote for a first strike?”

“We didn’t,” Dr. Wells denied, Edward said nothing.

“Is there or is there not an asteroid heading right at Havilah?” Daniel demanded.

"There is," Dr. Wells said. "It wasn't the council's doing, it was Margaret and Oliver."

Dr. Wells and Edward took the next ten minutes bring Daniel up to date on the attack on Havilah. As they told the story, Daniel watched as Jacob's face grew tight and pale.

"Murders," Jacob spat at they wound down.

"Not today," Daniel said. "Edward can't we call up the asteroid and fire that motor? We've got the council authorization override codes."

"Margaret didn't leave us that option," Edward said. "She disabled the transceiver. There's no way to get a signal to the asteroid. The only way to setup a firing sequence is manually."

"And that rad field is over seventeen hundred rad," Dr. Wells added. "So that isn't an option to us."

"We've still got sixty some-odd hours," Edward said. "Can Havilah be evacuated? Maybe to the mines?"

"That won't work," Jacob snapped. "You might as well call the *beasts* to the dining hall!"

"You are the sons of Cain!" Jacob shouted as he tried to get up off the make shift bed.

"Easy there," Dr. wells said moving to his side.

"Don't touch me!" Jacob shook off her hand as she reached out to him. "Murders!"

"Jacob!" Daniel shouted. "This isn't helping!"

"What is going to help, nigger?" Jacob hobbled up onto his good leg. "Can you tell me that?"

"Yes," Daniel said. "I think I can."

Daniel stood and looked over at Edward.

"I know how to stop this," He said. "Are you going to help me?"

"There isn't a way," Edward said, his deep tan face contorted in guilt and grief.

"If you can get us to the asteroid," Daniel said. "There is a way. Margaret isn't half as clever as she thinks she is."

"Let's do it if we can," Dr. Wells said turning to Edward.

Edward stood silent for several moments. Not looking at his friends and not looking at Jacob.

"Can you live letting thousands of people die?" Daniel asked. "Cause that's the real decision, and every day from now on you're going to be re-living it in the mirror every morning."

"You know something about that don't you?" Edward asked.

"Hell, yes," Daniel answered. "That's how I know there's no way in heaven and hell I can do it. If we don't divert that rock, then I'm going back to Havilah."

“Can’t have that,” Edward said. “Let me run the numbers.”

Edward stepped over the bulkhead and brought up a computer interface.

“Don’t worry,” Daniel said to Jacob as Edward entered the calculation. “The shuttle should have the delta-vee to get us there.”

“We can do it,” Edward said after a few minutes. “We’ll have to come back to Seclusion and glide it in for more reaction mass, but its doable.”

“Than let’s do it,” Daniel said. Together, they went to the flight-deck.

#

“Is this going to take much longer?” Kyle asked as Brian worked at the controls of the shuttle.

“Plotting an intercept is easy,” Brian answered without looking up from the flight controls. “Even having the shuttle do it on automatics isn’t hard for this computer. What’s taking up all the time is plotting all the potential aborts and return to Sampson Bay.”

“Skip those,” Kyle ordered. “Just program for an intercept.”

“I can’t do that,” Brian protested. “After they turn the asteroid, we’d have no way of stopping the collision.”

“Brian,” Kyle said. “There’s lots of asteroids and meteors that they can drop on us. The only way we can keep Havilah safe is to end the threat, forever.”

“You can’t mean that,” Brian said.

“I don’t like it,” Kyle replied. “But we don’t have a choice.”

“We can’t do that,” Brian’s eyes widened in horror and shock. “That’s murder, and it would leave us without the Redemption for The Day Of Return.”

“If we don’t kill them before that kill us, there won’t be a day of return.” Kyle pointed back to the controls. “Now finish programing that intercept.”

“No, sir,” Brian said.

“Brian,” Kyle said. “I’m ordering you to plot and program that intercept.”

“No, sir,” Brian stood and forced his way past Kyle. “I’m not going to hell for you.”

#

The crushing acceleration quit and Jacob was grateful. Only, now his stomach felt as if it were dropping away from him, never to return.

“Our next burn is in thirty-seven minutes,” Edward announced as the controls faded out of existence, leaving behind just an array of graphs and read-outs.

“How are you doing?” Dr. Wells asked from her seat behind Daniel and next to Jacob.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Jacob admitted.

“I can take care of that,” Dr. Wells said. She produced a thin blue strip from somewhere on her far side and offered it to Jacob.

“Put that in your mouth,” she said. “Just let it melt, don’t swallow.”

Jacob did as he was instructed. The strip tasted sweet and dissolved almost immediately. Jacob’s stomach settled down and despite the continuous falling sensation, Jacob felt much better.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Get the Council on holo,” Daniel requested. “We might as well get Margaret’s shouting over with.”

#

“Daniel,” Margaret shouted, “You answer me right now!”

Daniel’s image appeared in the holo-display in the center of the conference table.

“No need to shout Margaret,” Daniel’s said. “I’m not going behind the Council’s back like some people have.”

“Daniel,” Todd interrupted. “What are you doing?”

“I’m correcting a mistake.” Daniel replied. “I’m diverting the asteroid for a clean miss of the moon.”

“There is no way to do that,” Margaret snapped.

“Yes,” Daniel agreed. “I’d say you thought this out very well, but you did miss a detail here and there.”

“Daniel,” Oliver said, leaning in towards Daniel’s image above the table. “Think about what you are doing. These people, what they believe, is just too dangerous.”

“Listen to yourself,” Daniel said. “That is exactly what the voyeurs said about us.” Daniel’s image turned to face Margaret. “And it’s hard to say they were wrong.”

“Don’t confuse things, Daniel.” Margaret sat back down. “They are a danger, I won’t risk genocide.”

“But you will commit it,” Catherine said. “This is not what Seclusion is about, and I for one will not be a party to it.”

“Open your eyes,” Oliver said. “These people are the type who have killed millions on millions. I will not let Annie grow up under the threat that they are.”

“Who’s doing the killing, Oliver?” Daniel retorted. “It’s not the racists, it’s us. Or I should say it’s you.”

“It’s not killing,” Margaret said. “It’s self-defense. Good God, Daniel you were there; you know you were going to be killed.”

“Maybe I was, but does that really justify this? The people of Havilah are pacifists, opposed to killing, but like us not everyone is on the same page. Let’s deal with what they are, not what some think they are, and if they do become a threat, then let’s deal with it when it appears.”

“Those ‘rouge’ elements exist because of their twisted sick ideology,” Oliver said. “If they didn’t believe in that insane religious claptrap we never would have been in danger.”

“That’s right,” Daniel agreed, “And if we didn’t believe in privacy, Margaret and you, never could have hijacked the asteroid.”

“This is pointless,” Margaret announced. “Because there is no way to divert the asteroid.”

“Wrong again Margaret,” Daniel said. “I’m going to manipulate the controls at the launch site.”

“Daniel!” Doctor Wells’ voice came urgently from Daniel’s background. “That’s more than a lethal dose, you can’t do that.”

“I can Elizabeth,” Daniel said softly. “I’m just going to have to accept the price.”

Everyone sat silent, staring at the image of Daniel floating in front of them.

“It’s senseless,” Margaret offered. “You can stop this one, but in the end the Council will vote my way and you’ll have achieved nothing.”

“Maybe,” Daniel offered. “But I will have achieved one thing. I will not be responsible for murder. My conscience will be clear.”

“You won’t have a conscience; you’ll be dead.”

“Daniel,” Catherine said softly. “Please don’t.”

“I have to Catherine,” Daniel looked away from the pickup, a tear in his eye. “I was weak before, you know what I mean, I’m through being weak and having others pay the price for it.”

The holo-display vanished from the deck, leaving the Governing Council in dim shadows.

#

Brian ran from the shuttle hanger, as fast as his feet would carry him, charging towards the church. Kyle followed, not running, but striding determined to get someone in Havilah to see the truth as it really was. There was precious little time left.

Kyle entered the Aldermens’ doorway, from behind the stage and the pulpit, He could see all of Havilah gathered in the church. Row upon row of white faces, bowed in prayer, doing nothing to defend themselves or avenge their own god-damn murder.

“You can’t just pray your way out of this!” Kyle shouted as he stormed up to the pulpit.

“Sit down,” Alderman Knight said softly, but his voice, caught by the church’s address system, echoed through-out the cavernous structure.

“No,” Kyle snapped. “I’m not going to just sit down and meekly accept whatever happens.”

“It is not our judgment,” Knight replied. “It’s God’s law that none may kill.”

“Screw that,” Kyle shouted, then he turned and faced all of Havilah.

“Listen to me,” he pleaded. “It’s good, real good, to be Christian and forgiving with each other. We are good people and we’ll treat each other right, but those people above us are not good people. You can’t turn the other cheek and expect everything is going to be okay. You can’t turn your back on them anymore than you can a beast. They’ve already proven that!

They’re coming to murder us and take our land. Is that the act of a good people? Is that something you can trust to God?”

“His law is absolute,” Knight said. “There can be no variance.”

“There is no God’s Law!” Kyle snapped. “When you’re dying of sickness it’s a parasite that’s killing you, not God! When you’re bleeding and the death-angles are tearing you to bits, it’s not God it’s nature. When you’re drowning there is no God there to pull you out!”

Kyle felt his knees weaken and then the sharp pain as they struck the stage next to the pulpit. Oh Naomi! If there was a God how could he let her die. Tears poured from his face and his chest burned with pain as he sobbed. There was no justice, there was no fairness, in the end there was only death.

#

Daniel was in the cargo airlock, checking out his pressure suit, Jacob floated, one hand firmly grasping a bulkhead handhold, just a meter away. The small boat that they had arrived in was secured in the middle of the deck.

“Did you mean that?” Jacob asked.

“About what?” Daniel asked.

“Going into the radiation field,” Jacob’s brown hair floated in a nimbus around his head.

“It’s the only way,” Daniel said. “I meant every word. I’ve taken the coward’s way out before, I’m not going to do it again.”

“That wasn’t the coward’s way out,” Jacob said. “I don’t know what I would have done in your shoes, but I know you aren’t a coward.”

“Thanks,” Daniel replied. Somehow Jacob’s opinion mattered more now than all the praise he had received on the matter.

"I should go," Jacob said. "It's my people in danger not yours."

"I wish I didn't have to," Daniel said. "But it has to be me. You don't have the access and Margaret isn't here to do it. Not that she would."

Daniel switched on the diagnostics of the pressure-suit and and nodded as the indicators returned with green light. Damn, here it was at last, the end of the road.

"There is a small chance I will survive," Daniel said. "Dr. Wells is a hell of a physician."

"You'd bet your life on that?" Jacob asked.

"No," Daniel turned to Jacob. "I don't think the dice will turn up that way. But it's time I became the hero everyone thought I was."

"You always have been," Edward said as he floated into the large cargo lock. "You were the only one who didn't see that."

"Can't you do this with remotes?" Jacob asked.

"No," Edward answered. "Margaret left a jammer on-site. We can't transmit, and there isn't enough time to program a detailed mission."

"There must be another way," Jacob said.

"If you can think of it, I'm game." Daniel said.

No one suggested a plan.

"That's the trouble isn't it?" Daniel said. "Come on, I've a lot to do and little time left."

#

Twenty hours and several unpleasant high-gee burns later the shuttle was traveling along side the asteroid.

"Our tanks are almost dry," Edward said after he locked down the controls. "I'm going to have to dead-stick it when I land."

"Are you going to be stranded?" Jacob asked.

"No way," Edward said. "We've got power to spare on board, spend a few hours taking on reaction mass and we'll be good to go again."

"After that, Edward can get you home," Daniel floated out of the co-pilots' seat and heading back to the passenger compartment.

"It should have been Brian," Jacob said as he clumsily tried to follow Daniel. "He would have loved flying for real for a change."

"I don't know what to say," Jacob confessed.

"I just want you to understand why I'm doing this," Daniel said as they continued forward to the cargo-lock.

"I'm not doing this for your people, or even for mine," Daniel explained. "I'm not even doing this because of how fucking guilty I'd feel if I didn't do it. When you get down to it, being alive and guilty seems a lot more appealing than being dead."

“Why then?” Jacob reached out and took a hand hold as Daniel began donning the pressure-suit.

“Because killing someone over what they believe is wrong and stupid and I won’t be a party to it.” Daniel bend double, expertly slipping the lower half on the pressure-suit over his legs.

“Your people are screwed up,” Daniel said. “But they have a right to be screwed up. My people are screwed up too, and I hope to God we all they learn from this.”

The conversation was briefly interrupted as Daniel slipped the carapace over his head, and then affixed the helmet to its seal.

“Murder, one or thousands, is always wrong,” Daniel said flipping up the visor of the helmet.

“Thou Shall Not Kill,” Jacob quoted.

“Yes,” Daniel agreed. “But just as important, ‘...that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...”

“What’s that from?” Jacob asked.

Daniel sighed heavily.

“I don’t have time to go into it,” Daniel started moving forward toward the inner door of the lock. “Let’s just say it’s your right to be stupid.”

Daniel opened the inner door, and indicated the area aft of it.

“I can’t say it’s been nice knowing you,” Daniel said. “But I’m glad you were there when we needed you. I think Havilah has a chance with decent people like you.”

Jacob stepped back outside of the airlock and watched as the mirrored visor slid down obscuring Daniel’s brown face.

“I’ll pray for you,” Jacob said.

“Thanks.” Daniel’s voice was slightly distorted as it came from the speakers built into the pressure-suit. “I’ll tell him you did.”

The inner door closed and Jacob was alone.

#

Daniel listened to the steady whitenoise of the suit’s life support systems. It was a good suit, but not designed for the radiation environment he was about to plunge it into, but no suit could protect him there. Now, for the first time, Daniel felt truly alone. It was liberating, but in the back of his mind he knew he wasn’t alone.

Amanda and rest of the *Anson* were with him. Soon he would be with them.

“Ready for upload?” Edward's voice suddenly cut in.

“Ready for data,” Daniel replied, then he watched the progress on his suit built-in network as Edward’s trajectory and burn calculations downloaded.

“Download complete,” Daniel reported.

“Airlock secure,” Daniel said over the radio.

“Go with God,” Edward said from the cockpit.

“God’s grace,” Jacob joined in.

“I’ll be here waiting for you,” Dr. Wells said. “I won’t give up on you, Daniel.”

“I’d be surprised if you did,” Daniel replied.

Daniel set the airlock to cycling and turned to face the outdoor.

As Daniel’s heartbeat and respiration accelerated the alarms sounded. Daniel switched off the monitors as best he could, safety interlocks refused to let him kill all the alarms. This trip was already going to kill him, he didn’t need a report on how nervous it made him.

The outer doors swung silently open. Ahead of the shuttle the asteroid floated, apparently motionless against the starry background. The illusion please Daniel, even with his knowledge that they, the shuttle and the asteroid, were moving as tens of kilometers per second. With a touch on his control, Daniel fired the thrusters on his pressure-suit and flew out of the airlock.

The asteroid lay just a few kilometers ahead and was large enough to eclipse Seclusion, but the gas giant was also. Daniel’s universe shrank to himself and the asteroid he was approaching.

“Approach is in the pipe,” Daniel reported. No one replied; Daniel didn’t blame them. Either they opposed what he was doing, or they didn’t want to speak with a dead man, either way he was alone.

Strangely, he felt less alone than he had in months. A peace engulfed him; a finality that made the rest of his life shrink into perspective. Life had been good, but he had been too self-absorbed to see it. Moping around, playing the tragic hero, what a stupid waste.

The radiation alarm overrode his instructions and began beeping insistently in his ear. Good safety engineering, but damn annoying. Daniel worked to shut it off, but found the best he could do was quiet it to a whisper.

“Someone should congratulate the designer of this pressure-suit,” Daniel radioed back. “It’s fairly idiot proof.”

The on board network detected Daniel’s landing zone, and highlighted it on his heads-up-display.

“I can see the reaction engine, fusion plant, and control systems,” Daniel reported. “I should be on the asteroid in less than five minutes.”

“Roger,” Edward finally answered. “We track you on target.”

“Thanks,” Daniel said.

Daniel watched as the radiation levels continued to rise. It still wasn't too late to turn back. Daniel knew he wouldn't turn back even as parts him screamed to. There was one last job to do.

As Daniel's radiation exposure increased the indicator switched from green, to yellow. Daniel had seen yellow before, the life of an Explorer rarely was free from radiation dangers. When the indicator turned red Daniel moved into new territory. Now he was in a lethal field, the longer he was here the lower the chances a brilliant doctor could save him.

Daniel's boots touched down as his jets fired under the networks command to prevent Daniel from bouncing off the asteroid. Moving slowly and carefully Daniel bunny-hopped to the control systems.

Kneeling, Daniel opened the cover on the emergency manual controls.

“Don't do it, Daniel.” Margaret voice was so clear Daniel thought she could be inside his helmet with him.

“I'm not wrong about this,” Margaret continued. “These people are a danger to us, and who knows who else. If we don't take care of this now, we'll pay much more dearly later on.”

“Maybe,” Daniel conceded as he entered his override code. “But that's doesn't make you right. There is never a justification for mass murder. Ever.”

The radiation alarm continued to sound, and Daniel saw that his medical telemetry had begun to transmit automated S.O.S's. Aside from a slight buzzing in his ear, and light headiness Daniel felt fine. This could be a practice mission, like so many vacuum hikes he had taken during his career.

“Daniel, do you really think they are worth it?” Oliver asked, intruding into the circuit.

“No,” Daniel replied. “They aren't, but rights aren't about worth.”

The network acknowledged Daniel's commands as Daniel's own network uploaded the instructions for the attitude burn.

“It's done,” Daniel said softly. “For better or worse.”

On the tiny holo-display relayed to Daniel's helmet, the count down began to the firing of the fusion motors. Another readout displayed the radiation spike as the fusion plant revved up to one-hundred and seven percent for the burn. Daniel's lightheadedness grew more intense and it seemed voices were speaking to him, but nothing mattered.

Daniel stood and looked out to the shuttle, just barely visible several kilometers away. It was time to leave again, the asteroid had no

acceleration couches for passengers, or Daniel would have stayed with it -- somehow that felt fitting. If he tried to stay, the acceleration would fling him off like a toy, so there was nothing to do but try to return home.

Daniel activated the automated program and felt the familiar kick as his thrusters pushed him away from the asteroid. His head swam, and the universe started spinning, the synapses of his brain must have started to go. Too bad -- it would have been nice to have a little more time.

The universe continued spinning. Radiation damage, Daniel realized, the thruster-unit's computer systems were failing. Daniel watched, detached and unconcerned, as the shuttle slid from his view. He wasn't going home, but that didn't matter either.

It seemed fitting that an Explorer should die in space.

Chapter 24

No one wanted to leave the church. Kyle had tried, half-heartedly, to convince them to move to action, but they wouldn't be budged. They sang hymns, they took care of each others children, they brought sandwiches and water for each other, and they prayed. That's all they would do for themselves, beg a fantasy to save them.

Kyle had left the church, but the empty street of Havilah brought him back to the church again and again. Havilah was a ghost town waiting to become ghosts.

"Kyle," Knight said, kneeling next to Kyle's seat. "Won't you join us? It would lift your heart."

"Forget it," Kyle said, turning his face away from Knight. Not in shame, hell no, if he saw that face, that placid begging face, he'd lash out and destroy it.

"God won't turn his back on you, Kyle. He is eternal forgiveness." Knight's voice was soft, gentle, and the most irritating thing Kyle could remember.

"He's not there, Roger," Kyle said. "He never was."

"I'll pray for you," Roger Knight said, rising to his feet.

Kyle couldn't tell how many hours had passed. Time ceased to mean anything. He had failed to protect Havilah just as he had failed to protect Naomi. The only thing left would be blistering fire from the sky.

"The asteroid is diverting!" Peter's high, girlish voice pierced through the hymns. "They've fired the engines again! They're diverting it!"

The crowd exploded. Kyle didn't care, it didn't matter, nothing mattered, nothing would ever matter again.

"My friends," Knight said from the pulpit. "Our prayers have been answered. Peter says the light of the fusion motor is as clear as the bush was to Moses. We have been saved. God has revealed himself to

our misguided brothers and through them he has caused death to pass us over.”

Whatever had happened, Kyle knew it hadn't been God's work. It was men and in the end that meant nothing good.

“Oh Lord,” Knight said, leading the people in a prayer of thanks. “We thank you for this day and this miracle of your hand. We have heard the wings of the angle of Death, and we have heard the temptation of Cain. Today you have spared us, unworthy as we are, today you have shown us the love and the mercy that is thy name and thy law. Today, and everyday, we will show you our worship and our love. Today and everyday we will live as you have commanded us to, Amen.”

#

“Good Lord,” Dr. Wells said as Edward removed Daniel's helmet.

Daniel brown skin was now black, not deep brown but black like a patch of night-time sky without any stars here and there it was pink in spots, and red where the burns were bled. His long black hair came off with the helmet, taking bits of skin with it. Jacob felt the need to vomit, but the drugs he had been given kept his stomach under control.

“He'd gone black,” Jacob said.

“A radiation tan,” Dr. Wells said without breaking her attention from her patient.

“Is he?” Jacob asked, unable to finish the question.

“No,” Dr. Wells said, not taking her eyes off her work. “not yet.”

Daniel's helmet floated free as Edward tossed it aside, and unfastened the hard carapace of Daniel's pressure-suit. Working quickly, Edward and Dr. Wells soon had Daniel stripped down to the coverall garment he wore under the pressure-suit.

“Jacob,” Edward said, his voice tinted with the edge of someone in command. “Assist Dr. Wells. I've got to get back to the flight-deck.”

Jacob obeyed, ignoring Edward's dark hispanic complexion. Edward nodded and kicked himself out of the passenger compartment.

“Help me get him strapped down,” Dr. Wells said.

Following her directions, Jacob helped secure Daniel to the same makeshift treatment bed that he had laid in just a day before.

“How long before you maneuver?” Dr. Wells appeared to ask the wall.

“Frankly, I'd like to do it now,” Edward voice answered. “Drop-dead, and I mean that Elizabeth, is thirty-seven minuets.”

“Give me fifteen,” she replied.

Jacob let himself float away from the makeshift bed and grabbed a handhold on the wall. Dr. Wells moved about her patient with a

clumsiness that indicated she wasn't really a weightless kind of person either. Whenever she rotated out of position, or found herself having to grip a handhold instead of working on Daniel, she swore, but never lost her focus.

Fifteen minutes later Daniel was strapped down, sedated, air was being forced into his lungs and a complex weightless IV system was strapped to his chest.

"That's the best I can do here," She said to no one in particular.

"Hell of a way to treat a guest," she said taking notice of Jacob. Jacob averted his eyes from her angry stare.

"Come on," she said kicking off towards the flight-deck. "Let's not waste any freaking time."

Clumsily moving from handhold to handhold, Jacob followed Dr. Wells to the flight-deck.

#

"He did it," Catherine said, her voice full of admiration for Daniel's insanely stupid stunt. "The asteroid's going to miss and impact the gas giant."

"Thank god for that," Todd dropped heavily, even for a third gravity, into his seat.

"This isn't a happy thing," Margaret said. "We're all going to pay the price one day for this."

"Shut up," Catherine said. "I'm tired of hearing about it. I'm tired of hearing how right you are, and I'm tired of this fighting."

"She's right," Oliver snapped. "We've lost today, we've lost everything."

"No," Todd said softly. "You've lost. *We* didn't decide anything, you didn't give us a choice. Now we do have one."

"And what do we do about it?" Herb asked, his deep bass voice rumbling across the conference table at Margaret.

"First we find out how our people are," Todd suggested. "Everything else can wait for the moment."

Margaret sat back and crossed her arms. Seclusion wasn't safe, and when the Council was finished, neither her nor Oliver would have a voice, or their freedom anymore. All of it was wasted and for nothing.

Her heart skipped a beat at the sound of Edward's voice, but then she realized the call wasn't for her, it was for Todd. She had lost Edward too. She had nothing.

"It's going to be touch and go," Edward said. "We're low on reaction mass."

"Can you return to the ship?" Herb asked.

“Not directly,” Edward replied. “We don’t have the delta-vee to the polar inclination. Just to make orbit I’m going to have to aerobrake.”

“How about the Independence matches orbit with you?” Herb asked. “Feed us the orbits you can make and I’ll pass’em over to Captain Domingo.”

“Transmitting now,” Edward answered.

“How’s Daniel?” Todd asked.

“Sedated,” Dr. Wells replied. “The sooner I can get him to the hospital the better, but his chances are very slim.”

“We’re waiting for you,” Todd said. “Anything you need, we’ll provide.”

“Prayers,” Edward replied. “That might help.”

#

Fifty some-odd hours later, Jacob sat in the seat next to Edward as they approached Havilah. Directly behind him, Dr. Wells sat, her eyes glue to monitors reporting Daniel’s condition. Jacob knew nothing of how to read the indicators, but it seemed to him that so many with red displays could not be a good thing.

“Orbit plotted and programed,” Edward announced into the radio.

“We read you,” the Independence answered. “You’re in the pipe. Good luck.”

“What are we doing?” Jacob asked.

“We’re coming in too fast,” Edward answered as he watched his own readouts. “And I don’t have the reaction mass to decelerate us into orbital velocity.”

Edward gestured towards Havilah floating peacefully in the display before them.

“At this speed we can zip past Seclusion, and on into the gas giant eventually, or we can slam into the moon just like the asteroid was going to.”

“So how do we slow down?”

“We graze the atmosphere,” Edward said. “Let it drag down our speed. The trick is not to let it drag us down too much. Too steep into the soup and it’s like hitting the ground, we’re smashed, too shallow and we skip off into space.”

“And if we did that?”

“Oh, that survivable, for us. The ship would send out another shuttle and that would eventually catch up to us, but Daniel’s clock is ticking.” Edward looked back at Dr. Wells, she was still locked on her read-outs.

“Have you done this before?” Jacob asked.

“Only in sim,” Edward replied. “It’s an emergency procedure and I really try not to have emergencies.”

Jacob settled in and waited.

Frustration built inside him. Back home there were many ways he could help and lead, here he could do nothing except wait. A steady slow beeping came from Dr. Wells’ monitors as Jacob watched Edward program in the approach.

“Now,” Edward said, strapping himself securing into his seat. “We ride.”

The ship began to shudder and to shake. The upper thin reaches of Havilah’s atmosphere tore at the skin of the ship, forcing Jacob and the others forward into the straps and the ship suddenly slowed.

“First skip,” Edward announced.

This time the ship shook more violently. Jacob was thrown with more force against his straps and a scream came from the skin of the shuttle.

“Second skip,” Edward said.

“How many are we going to do?” Dr. Wells asked.

“Five,” Edward replied. “But the fourth will be the biggie.”

The ship dipped into the atmosphere again, and again the whole craft shook and trembled. This time Jacob was certain that they had dove too deep, the earthquake-like shaking seemed to continue on forever. Then it ceased as suddenly as it had started.

“How’s Daniel?” Edward asked over his shoulder.

“Stable,” Dr. Wells replied without taking her eyes from the monitors.

The whole cabin began shaking again, from the skin of the ship next to his head Jacob listen in horror as the metal groaned and creaked. Jacob was pressed so firmly into his safety strap he felt as if he were hanging upside down from a tree.

A flashing red light lit on the controls in front of Edward and a shrill alarm began shrieking. The view on the screen vanished.

“We lost our PEM coating,” Edward announced, shouting over the din and the alarms. With effort, Edward reached up and silenced the alarms.

“Five more seconds,” Edward said.

Five second stretched out like five years as the ship jumped and screamed around Jacob. Then all the noise quit and the cabin was plunged into silence except for the hiss of the life support systems.

“One more,” Edward said. “but this is just a baby adjustment. We made it.”

True to his word, the fifth breaking dip was as gentle as Edward's first.

"*Independence*," Edward called out on the radio. "We're in orbit and stable. You want to come give us that docking now?"

"We're on our way," the reply answered.

#

Jacob stayed with Daniel as they transferred to the main ship. The large ship was a dazzling confusion of different kinds of walls and floors. It seemed each floor selected something different for the way they want to look. Wood, stone, metal, Jacob saw it all as they hustled Daniel down through the floors to the medical bay.

At the medical bay, Dr. Wells sat Jacob outside of her treatment area and went inside with her staff.

People were kind, but distant to Jacob as he waited for word from Dr. Wells about Daniel. A week ago Jacob feared Daniel, now he feared for Daniel.

#

The cool metallic air of a ship's circulation system welcomed Daniel back to consciousness. He hurt terribly, his body ached as though he had been beaten from terribly. Slowly, he opened his eyes; the bright lighting strips programmed into the overhead of the Medical Bay dazzling his eyes.

"Hello there," Dr. Wells said as she stood next to his bed.

"I don't feel as bad as I thought I would," Daniel admitted.

"You're through the first phase," Dr. Wells turned away from Daniel and examined read-outs on the bulkhead generated display. "I kept you sedated while the worst of the symptoms passed, for now."

"Did it divert?" Daniel asked, sitting up in his bed.

"Yes," Dr. Wells responded after the coughing fit had passed. "The asteroid's impacted the gas giant."

Daniel laid his head back down on the smart fibers of the pillow and let them cool his skin while massaging his pain.

"Damn stupid thing you did," Dr. Wells said. "And the right one. I wish there had been another way."

"Me too," Daniel replied. "You said for now. What's going to happen next?"

"You're currently in an asymptomatic phase of lethal radiation poisoning." Dr. Wells said, her eyes not meeting his. "When you go symptomatic again it will almost be over."

"When is that?" Daniel felt the compartment spin about him. He hadn't beaten the odds, this was just a cruel tease.

“A day, maybe three, five at most.” Dr. Wells turned back to face him, her eyes were red from crying. “Until then you’re going to feel pretty well.”

“How did I get back here?” Daniel asked “Last thing I remember, I think, was spinning out of control trying to get back to the shuttle.”

“Edward waited until your suit was empty,” She answered. “And caught you like a pop fly.”

Dr. Wells came about and tossed a loose set of clothes on Daniel's bed.

“You stay in bed, but you can greet your visitors,” she said.

“Let me get dressed,” Daniel answered. There was still much to do and from the sound of it, he didn't have much time left to do any of it.

“I'll help you with that.” Elizabeth moved forward to help him.

#

Kyle Brock felt free, which is not the same thing as to say he felt happy. Happiness died long ago, but now he didn't feel like he was living a lie anymore.

The trial of the Aldermen had been mercifully short. Kyle knew what his fate was before Knight's first gavel strike and Kyle didn't protest or fight his destiny.

Two Watchmen, one on each side, walked Kyle towards the North gate of Havilah. Kyle wanted Jacob here, he would have liked to have said good-bye to the boy, but that wasn't to be. Jacob was still in orbit, with the nigger he helped to escape. Jacob was a good boy, even if he was too kind to see what the universe was really like.

As they walked along the wide avenue that lead from Havilah's town square to the north gate, people stopped what they were doing to watch and stare as Kyle was exiled.

This was history. Never had an Alderman been exiled. Let them stare.

The red sun was only a quarter of the way into the sky and it promised to be a perfect day. Soon the buildings of Havilah fell behind them, and Kyle and his Watchmen escort were walking through the cultivated fields of crops.

The corn was coming along nicely, it looked to be a very good crop. They were going to have give serious thought about expanding soon, if the niggers let them.

The bulk of the wall grew as they approached. Kyle had been beyond the walls many times, but now he would never be back within them. No death penalty, ha! Everyone knew what it was like out there. This fiction of leaving it to God was nice for the rest of them but Kyle

knew that it was going to be all up to him. In the end everyone died and that was all there was to the world.

“Sir,” he was asked. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, let’s get this over with.”

A bulky pack was handed to Kyle. Simple tools and a little food. After all if someone wasn’t being exiled as just a method of killing, you had to preserve the illusion you were giving them a chance to survive. That God in his infinite mercy might save them and show them the errors of their ways.

“Do not load it until you are beyond the gate.” A pistol was shoved into Kyle’s hands. Ah yes, if you hadn’t killed anyone you even got this chance. Unless someone was intent on screwing him there would be ammunition in the pack.

“Thank you,” Kyle said automatically.

The Watchmen stepped back and Ruben, today’s North gate keeper, pulled the gate open. Kyle walked purposefully towards the gate.

“Alderman Brock?” Ruben said softly. Kyle stopped and turned in Ruben’s direction. Ruben stepped up to Kyle and put out his hand.

“I just wanted to wish you good luck and God’s mercy,” Ruben said as they shook hands. Also as they shook Ruben slipped a scrap of paper into Kyle’s hand.

“Thank you,” Kyle said, then turned and strode out of Havilah.

North to the mine, west at the second stream, the note read, there might be others to help you.

Kyle knew it was rumored that other exiles stayed in contact with Havilah, now was it was time to find out. Kyle walked north away from Havilah.

#

“What are you doing here?” Daniel asked as Jacob entered the sick room.

“I couldn’t leave until I knew how you were going to be,” Jacob said. “I wanted to say thank you and good-bye if I got the chance.”

“Let’s hope this wasn’t for nothing,” Daniel said.

“I won’t let it be that way,” Jacob said.

“Good,” Daniel agreed. “Thanks for being here.” Daniel coughed for several moments.

“Guess this phase isn’t entirely without symptoms,” he said.

“Is there any hope?” Jacob asked.

“Not according to Dr. Wells,” Daniel answered, “But this is just one step on life’s journey. Look at the bright side soon I’ll know if me or

you are right about God's salvation for us." Daniel tried to laugh, but collapsed into coughing again.

"Don't head home yet," Daniel suggested. "Not until I've spoken to the Governing Council. I might have a Christmas present for Havilah."

"Elizabeth," Daniel said. "Would you ask Todd and Catherine to come down?"

"They're waiting outside," Elizabeth replied. She put a hand on Jacob's shoulder.

Elizabeth smiled a weak smile, "Let's take a walk," She said leading Jacob out of the sick room.

When Todd and Catherine walked into the room they were pale and quiet.

"Jesus, this is so unfair," Catherine finally said, tears streaming from her eyes as she stood next to his bed.

"Life's unfair," Daniel said. "I knew what I was doing."

"Daniel," Todd said, his voice breaking up. "I said things I didn't mean, and I'm sorry."

"I don't want to spend my last hours crying," Daniel said. "I've spent the last five years crying in one way or another. It's time I stopped."

"Daniel..." Catherine started.

"I've been hiding from life and myself," Daniel said, firmly not letting Catherine get in her words. "I love you, but I used you Catherine. It was easier to hide in your gentle and nurturing spirit than face life as it is...was. I'm sorry both to you and to Todd. It's not how a friend should act."

"I can forgive you both," Todd said. "I've had a lot of time to think on this. I'm putting this behind me."

"I need one thing," Daniel said. "And I don't have a lot of time."

"Anything," Todd answered. "It's yours if I can do it."

"Am I still on the Council? Or was I replaced already?" Daniel asked.

"We never gave up on you," Catherine said. "Margaret did, but we didn't."

"I'll take that as a yes," Daniel was aware that the room seemed to be spinning. He sat back further in the chair, trying to continue.

"I need one more meeting before I can't think anymore," Daniel gripped the side of the bed, not yet, Dr. Wells said he has at least a day, not yet!

"Daniel?" Todd asked coming out of seat. "Are you alright?"

Daniel would have laughed if he had the strength, dying of radiation poisoning is not alright, then the room went black.

#

"I said you could meet your visitors," Dr. Wells said firmly as Daniel awoke in the medical bay. "Not get yourself all worked up."

"Sorry," Daniel croaked. "I'm not a good patient."

"No, you're not," Dr. Wells agreed.

"Yes, mam," Daniel replied.

Daniel watched as Dr. Wells produced a holographic projector and camera from the PEM coated bulkheads of his sickroom.

"Todd's got this idea," she said. "That you want to spend your last hours in a committee meeting."

"Well," Daniel answered. "Not all of them, but there is a proposal I have to make."

"Have it your way," Dr. Wells took a seat next to Daniel's bed as the image of the Governing Council appeared in miniature above his bed.

"This meeting is in session," Todd announced formally. "Let it be noted that the Council is presently short two members."

Daniel noted Oliver and Margaret's absence. There would fall out from this for months and years.

"Daniel?" Todd asked. "You have a proposal?"

"Yes," Daniel said weakly. "Let's take Havilah under our Charter."

"Danny, are you serious?" Herb's shock was plain, even when his face was a tiny holographic reproduction.

"Never more so, Herb," Daniel answered. "They came out here looking for freedom, just like we did."

"But," Todd said. "We haven't been torturing people and considering them sub-human."

"No, we did almost commit genocide," Daniel answered.

"We didn't," Catherine snapped. "Margaret and Oliver did that. You know that!"

"Yes I do," Daniel agreed. "And the people of Havilah didn't know what was going on, either. We're not so different."

"Are you sure about this Daniel?" Edward asked. Daniel could tell that Edward had been crying, but Edward would never admit it.

"I stopped that asteroid," Daniel said. "Because mass murder is never justified, but before that I realized we can't be free unless everyone is free."

"I know what they are," Daniel said. "but there's something else they are; people."

"Daniel," Edward said. "You can't condone that sort of culture. It's like saying go ahead Hitler, have a little breathing room."

“No, it’s not,” Daniel replied. “They have no army, and they don’t condone killing. I won’t excuse the rest, God knows they’re a stupid people, but they have a right to be stupid.”

Daniel turned to Todd.

“Margaret says one day they will be a threat, that their kind of thinking can’t help but be a danger. Just like people said that about us. If we are to believe in freedom, then let’s believe in freedom for everyone, and not just our own.”

“That’s a tall order, Daniel,” Todd said.

“It’s easy to give freedom to puppies and little girls,” Daniel replied. “It’s more important to give it to everyone.”

Daniel collapsed into another coughing fit, followed quickly by more retching.

“I’ll vote for it, Daniel,” Dr. Wells said.

The vote was unanimous. Daniel knew he was playing on their sympathy and their emotions. One last favor to the dying hero, but now he had left something real and lasting. It might not work, but they deserved to give it a chance to work.

“Let Jacob take them the news,” Daniel said. “Assuming of course they agree to it.”

“I think they will,” Todd said.

Daniel closed his eyes, the pain growing in his body, even as his mind seemed to detach. Despite the brightness of the lighting strips, the room grew dark. Off in the darkness Daniel became aware of the crew of the *Anson* were waiting for him. Everything was as it should have been.

Surrounded by his friends, Daniel died.

#

Jacob was happier than he had ever been. Cindi parents had answered Alderman Knight’s proposal. The marriage was going to be just before Christmas. Jacob couldn’t think of a better Christmas gift than a lifetime of Cindi’s love.

The Aldermen had spoken with the Governing Council of Seclusion and Havilah was going to be free and left alone. Everyone here could live and worship and they wished.

There wouldn’t be very many more camping trips with the Devil-Rats, Jacob promised he wasn’t going to waste any time.

“Story time,” he said. The scouts hurried to gather around the campfire, the moses bush throwing off reds, and greens as it burned. Jacob’s eye met Brian’s on the far side of the fire. No make-up would be needed tonight, even though it was still a store about a black man.

Jacob looked around the campfire, the faces of young boys stared back at him, yellow and orange with reflected flames. None of them really looked white, did they?

The scouts leaned in closer, not wanting to miss a single word.

“This is the story of a man named Daniel...” Jacob started.